

Fairytales Are For Children by AnimeFaeMoon

Series: Blondies Have More Fun [4]

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Summary:

All characters struggle to cope with their changing relationships as a new dark power threatens to destroy the world they live in.

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Chapter 1

Author's Note:

WARNING: This is the final story in this series and it has a very dark premise with some disturbing scenes!!! There will be some light, love and laughter to balance it, but there will also be Multiple Character Deaths. If you think this may disturb you, do not read.

I cannot guarantee weekly updates as my workload has tripled, but I will get a chapter up as often as I can. I hope you enjoy.

Riki sped through the streets of Tanagura, winding through the busy mid-day traffic with a swiftness that greatly surpassed all other vehicles on the road. It had been almost two months since Jupiter had decided that he was no longer a pet. His days of lounging around Iason's condo, bored and waiting for his Master to return, was now in the past. His new role as a registered technician gave him more than enough work to keep him busy.

It had taken a while for people to willingly employ a former pet and mongrel but Carrie's recommendations to other merchants regarding his work had done wonders to ease their concerns and opened the door for additional jobs. There seemed to be a general dislike among the vendors for the Tanagura Intermedia Technician Service, or TITS as Riki liked to call them, due to the length of time it took for them to attend a call and their total lack of concern over a problem. They would only fix the surface issue that mandated the call and would not bother to investigate further what may have initially caused it. Then something else would go wrong with the system, sometimes the same issue, and the TITS would have to be called again.

Riki's love of technology, which demanded he improve any system got his hands on, may have bordered on a compulsion, but to him it was a matter of pride to see just how far he could upgrade a system without spending mega credits. This talent, or obsession if you wanted to call it that, resulted in additional recommendations from the customers who were thrilled with his work. It did, however greatly reduce the opportunity for repeat customers.

He'd been approached several times by the Tanagura Techs, who were pissed that he was taking work away from them. At first, they put on a friendly face, explaining that if he continued to work so diligently he would have no customers left. But, Riki had been born in the slums, and when you made a deal with someone you followed all the way through with it or the consequences were dire. What party A wanted and what Party B was willing to give, or do for it, was always specifically discussed. When a customer called him to fix a system, he was making a deal to find the root problem of the malfunction and resolve it. If, after he did that, they wanted him to add a special software, or offered him more of a service fee for upgrading, that too was discussed and agreed upon.

He was still making deals the way he always had, only instead of trading his body or asking for sex, he was getting paid with credits. And he was aware that doing this might lower his chance for repeat customers, but if they were happy with what he did he would get new customers from it. Or, if they had additional problems, he would be the first one they would call, which offered a kind of security for him. The TITS didn't seem to understand his way of thinking, but then before Riki they didn't have to worry about such things, as they had been the only service company available for inter-media displays.

Unable to persuade Riki to their viewpoint, or to give up all together, the Tanagura Techs tried a different approach by starting rumors that Riki, as a former slum mongrel and pet, was stealing from his clients, or showing up at jobs and offering sex for money. Riki let that rumor run for a couple of weeks, ignoring it at first, but when it started to affect his client base, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He warned the TITS to put a stop to the rumors, or they'd learn just how good his skills were. The TITS then turned his words back on him, claiming it was a proposition for sex and told everyone who would listen that Iason's mongrel pet had gone wild.

Complaints were made to the Elites in charge of Tanagura's Service Association and Riki was warned that if he continued to deal in such things they would remove their approval for him to work in Eos and Tanagura. His new status as Iason's mate would save him from a beating or public humiliation, but it would not save him from being black listed.

Iason had been off planet when Riki received the warning, and had either not been privy to the rumors about him previously or had chosen to ignore them. Riki would not confide in the Blondie what was happening, because he didn't want to get Iason further involved. If he ran to Iason for every little thing then he really was just a pet. Instead, he decided to deal with the issue before Iason returned, and he chose to do it in his own way.

He had vented his frustration with Cal, who warned that a physical response would only give proof to the rumors, so he subtly suggested that Riki use his other talents instead. Thus, Riki hacked into the TITS records database, with some discrete assistance from Cal as he was still forbidden to play around in certain mainline systems. He specifically targeted their Accounts Payable Department, and found how much the Tanagura Techs had been overcharging regular people for service. All Elite requests for service were immediately and thoroughly responded to, with a reasonable rate requested, but the Humans, Gyrids and other species that sold their wares and ran businesses in Tanagura were made to wait and being fleeced.

Riki decided to make the dates and amounts of these private transactions public and displayed them on every advertising screen in Tanagura, along with the company's actual rate agreement showing what rates were supposed to be charged for which services. The information caused hundreds of duped customers to threaten a riot, until an official inquiry was opened to investigate the Tanagura Tech's business practices.

Iason returned the day after the files were released and as head of the Syndicate, was immediately pulled into the inquiry regarding the release of the files, because while an appalling revelation of what the TITS had been doing, it was more importantly a severe breach of system security.

Riki had expected someone to haul him in for questioning or accuse him at some point during the investigation, but apparently no one thought him capable of such a technical and brazen feat. While the TITS vocally accused him of hacking Tanagura's secured system and putting them out of business, the Elites apparently thought the idea of a mongrel pet having enough skill or intelligence to carry off such a thing was ludicrous.

Riki learned later that the Service Association apparently blamed the TITS for releasing the information themselves, in a bid to get rid of Riki, who was encroaching on their customers. Riki assumed that Iason had something to do with that direction of thought, which mildly irritated him as he was getting tired of letting Iason save his ass, but he was in the clear and that was all that mattered.

When Iason returned home from the inquiry, he didn't give much detail, other than the TITS were found responsible for the breach, however, he made Riki fully aware that he knew who was truly responsible for the incident. He'd been very angry and warned Riki to never do anything like it again, then he carried Riki into their bedroom and messed him up for the entire night and better part of the following morning. Riki had to cancel a service appointment the following day because he could barely move, but he accepted his punishment like a man and promised to never bother with TITS again.

His designation as Iason's consort had also created a bit of uproar, as many refused to believe that a mongrel could be a fit companion for a Blondie, but Jupiter's decision was absolute and no one dared to go against it, at least not publicly. Privately was another matter. While none of the Elite's 'officially' bothered him over it, there had been some instances where he had been called to a job or cornered outside of Eos by suspicious men. He suspected that these henchmen were acting on the orders of their contractor, and the only contractors who could afford such people were the Elites.

He had returned home several times with minor injuries, which he tried to hide from Iason by using the healing wand on himself, but of course Iason new every inch of his body and could tell each time, even without visual evidence that he had been hurt. Iason would have dealt with it himself, but Riki argued with him not to, insisting that he had to ride this out on his own. Which he did, and eventually those attacks stopped as well, because they realized that the slum mongrel turned Prince still had a fierce bite.

Riki turned the thoroughfare and lowered his speed as he continued along a less busy city street. Finally, he pulled up to a low-rise apartment building, parked his bike and slid off. He grabbed the satchel he had strapped to the back and clicked on the security field, before jogging inside the building.

Jogging up the stairs two at a time to the fourth floor, he knocked on the third door down.

Carrie smiled as she opened the door of her apartment and allowed him inside. “You’re late.”

“It’s your fault for being here instead of at the market place,” he tossed as he moved across the small living area to her two-seater kitchen table and set the satchel upon it. “And for living so far away.”

“I have to take a day off sometime,” she said and closed the door. “The rent is cheaper out here and it’s still in Tanagura.”

“Barely.” Riki stepped into her kitchen and pulled out two drinks.

Carrie shook her head. She didn’t know the specifics of Riki’s new role, or if he still required permission from Iason to visit her, but as they met twice a week for lunch, she assumed the Blondie had given his blessing. Usually they met at her stall, but occasionally, like today, they would meet at her apartment, based on when Riki’s schedule was free. She also had dinner at Iason’s two more times, and felt none of the initial anxiety that she’d had the first time.

“Would you like some cheese with that whine?” She pulled the lids off the containers to find two sets of pasta meals.

“I like cheese,” he returned as he settled at the table and dug into his meal immediately.

“You know, I can cook for us some time, I do know how.”

“Maybe next time. I can’t stay long today,” he advised. “I’ve got a conduit circuit to repair for a Rhinodect unit.”

“How much are they paying you?”

“Enough.”

“Do they give you credit or are you robbing them blind of their merchandise as you do me?”

“I've traded a few items, but mostly it's credits.”

“So, robbing them blind then?” She settled opposite him and picked up her fork.

“They accept the deal so how is it robbery?”

“Because you know just how to wear someone down, that's why.”

He shrugged. “If they can't be better at deal making, then why are they in the business of selling?”

“You could sell sand to a blind man in the desert, and you know it!”

“Well, there again, if he's stupid enough to be blind and in the desert...”

“You'd take advantage of him!”

Another shrug as he stuffed food in his mouth. “It's him or me, survival of the fittest. I don't see it as a problem.”

She laughed and couldn't help but agree. Of course, she knew that Riki wasn't really fleecing his customers, but she suspected that he wasn't being completely ethical either, using his charm and good looks to get what he wanted. He may not have to trade for sex any more, but there were few people who could resist an outgoing and charismatic Riki. He'd had a difficult life and deserved whatever he managed to get, but that wouldn't stop her from teasing him.

“Did you hear the news?” she asked.

“You've found a way to stop shedding on the furniture?”

She reached across the table and swatted him across the head then smiled again when his only acknowledgement was to fix his hair, as he continued to eat. Well, it wasn't as if her playful smack would have actually hurt him.

He was forever teasing her now about her feline form, not that she really minded. It was so nice to have someone acknowledge that side of her, even if it was just to taunt her.

“It’s about the Tanagura Service Technicians.”

He looked up. “What are those TITS up to now?”

Carrie laughed again. “Not much. Apparently, the inquiry made its decision and they’re being heavily fined for defrauding their client base. They also have to make a fifty percent restitution back to them.”

“Only fifty percent?”

It was Carrie’s turn to shrug as she took a bite of pasta. “The committee is made up of Elites, and their view is that the clients were just as much to blame for trusting the techs and not questioning their bills previously. Half is better than none and I think it will satisfy most people.”

“What about you? Does that mean that mean you’ll get some money back too?”

“No.” She smirked and shook her head. I used them a total of three times, each time they did dick all and when I got the invoice I kicked up such a fuss over it that I only had to ever pay half of what they were charging me.”

“Ah, so you were the one sensible person, I was wondering who that could be.”

“How are things going with you?”

“Okay. Good.” Riki finished off his food and rose to put the container in the recycler.

“There’s pie in the fridge,” she said and watched him swivel around to dive into the appliance, honing in on the pie almost immediately.

“How much can I have?”

“As much as you want.”

He pulled the pie out, closed the cooler unit and walked over to set the pie on the counter. He plucked a knife from the collection on the counter and paused. “I really can’t stay long.” He decided to only take a small piece, which he sliced and set on a plate before returning to the table.”

“It probably won’t be as good as Cal’s,” she warned as he started to eat.

“No, it’s good. Really good.” He glanced up at her. “Why’d you make pie?”

“I had some left-over fruit so decided to toss them in a pastry.”

“It’s good.”

She smiled at him and felt her heart melt just a little bit more. Not for the first time, she wondered if this was what it might be like to have a son, to watch him tuck into something she made with such focused enthusiasm. She wanted him to sit there and eat the whole damn pie, just so she could watch him do it.

A spark of loneliness pierced her heart suddenly and she lowered her gaze to her plate. She had to stop thinking like that. She would never have a child, and Riki was certainly not her son. He was a grown man and he belonged to a Blondie. Riki had a mother, even if he didn’t want her, and she was alive and he knew she was there.

“Carrie?”

She looked up and saw that Riki had finished his piece of pie and was now staring at her. “All done?”

“Yeah. Are you okay?”

“Sure.”

“You’re not. You’re sad. Why?”

It amazed her sometimes how well he could read her, when she could only tell what he was thinking if he wanted her to; he still kept his emotions close to the vest.

“I don’t think I should tell you.” She rose and walked with her plate, still half filled with pasta, and set it on the counter by the sink, then pulled a container out of her cupboard and cut the remaining pie in half. “Take some of this back with you. I’ll never eat it all.”

Riki rose and stood beside her. “I think you should tell me.” He took the knife from her, and set it aside. “Carrie?”

She tried to laugh it off as she boxed up the portion of pie. “A girl’s got to have some secrets.”

“Why?”

“They just do.”

“Not ones that make you sad when you were happy.”

She lowered her eyes so he wouldn’t see the fresh tears that sparkled on her lashes. She was happy when he was around, so very happy, and she had to get hold of herself because she was getting too attached. “Women are moody, didn’t anyone ever tell you that?”

“No. I’ve only met a couple of women, and you’re the second one I’ve even ever talked to. I know nothing about women.”

His brutal honesty broke her heart and made her laugh simultaneously as she turned and suddenly slid her arms around him. “Lesson one. When a woman is moody, this is the best medicine.”

Riki returned her embrace slowly, gently. He’d gotten past his initial fear that Iason might rip her apart for touching him; the Blondie had pretty much admitted that Carrie was no threat and an exception to the No Touch rule, but still, holding a woman was very different from holding a man. With Guy or Iason he was met with a solid, firm body that didn’t waiver, but

women were delicate, pliable and kind of squishy. He was always worried he might hurt Carrie because she was so soft, and to be honest, the feel of her breasts against him made him feel slightly awkward.

“What’s lesson two?”

“Lesson two.” Carrie pulled back. “Take a shower before your husband gets home so he doesn’t smell me on you.” She watched a tickle of pink surge against the dark skin of his cheeks. “What? You’re embarrassed because I mentioned a shower?”

Riki shook his head, no way would he admit that it was the term husband that had embarrassed him; no one had called Iason that yet, at least not to him. It had been mate or master or Blondie. For some reason the word husband made him feel suddenly shy, but also a little bit happy too.

“Lesson three,” he retorted as he grabbed his empty satchel and tossed it over his shoulder. “Women are hot when they’re moody.”

Carrie pretended to plump her hair. “Why thank you, you’re pretty cute yourself.”

“Heat! As in heat not in...” Riki shook his head at her, even as she grinned and slid the satchel back off his shoulder so she could put the container of pie into it. Well, at least she was smiling again, he thought as he took the bag from her. “Do you want to sleep over?”

Carrie had been putting the pie back in the cooling unit when his blurted words startled her into looking back. “Sorry?”

“The Eclipse will be here soon.” Riki shuffled his feet and looked at the tiles on the floor. “Iason said we can celebrate so you...you should come and...stay.”

Tanagura had a Solar Eclipse every five years that lasted for almost twelve hours, so there were only a few hours of daylight on that day. Most places closed their doors and took off to celebrate a night of complete darkness and decadence. She hadn’t been here for the first one, but she’d heard it had

been a very wild time. Crime rose on an Eclipse Day because of the shadows it allowed, and it was recommended not to go outside, so most stayed in and partied or went to special clubs that held overnight events.

“That’s very nice of you, Riki,” Carrie returned as she set the pie inside the fridge then straightened. “But I’m sure that Iason would like you to himself.”

“He has me to himself all the time!” Riki insisted then lowered his voice. He didn’t know why, but it was important to him that she come and stay with them. When he had broached the subject with Iason the Blondie did not have an issue with it. “It’s a whole day and night. All Iason wants to do is...” He broke off when she crossed her arms over her chest and smirked. “Don’t make me do *that* for a whole day and night.”

“How am I making you?”

“If you’re there we can play pool or watch vids or something, anything else.”

“Ah, I see. So I’m a buffer against Iason so he doesn’t love you to death?”

“No!” Riki chuckled and shuffled his feet again. “Just come okay? I don’t want you to spend it alone. You should spend it with me...us. You should spend it with us and then you won’t...”

“I won’t what?”

“Be sad.” He finally lifted his gaze to hers. “You won’t be lonely and sad.”

And she was goo once again. Carrie lowered her head and sighed heavily. So she wasn’t hiding it as well as she had thought. “I thought you knew nothing about women?”

“I don’t, but I know your expressions now. Please come? It will be fun, I promise. You can make more pie and we can drink a lot and be stupid together and...”

“And not be sad?” she challenged, softly.

“Yeah. And not be sad.”

She released a long groan.

“What? What did I say?”

“Everything. Nothing. Now I want to hug you again.”

“You can hug me as much as you want, I’m fine with it.”

She pretended to examine the pattern on her counter. “I don’t want to take advantage.”

“Okay, I’ll charge you two credits for each hug and when I call in my tab we can trade something from your booth.”

She laughed and tossed her arms around him again. “You’re so mercenary! I love that about you.”

“So you’ll come and stay for the Eclipse?”

“Yeah. I’ll come and stay.” She pulled back to look at him, tweaked his nose. “And not be sad.”

Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze has a talk with Iason and then Raoul

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks everyone for commenting. I know you are worked up about the character deaths so I will try and make it as painless as possible. They will not be until much later in the story so hopefully you can enjoy it, at least until then :-)

Katze glanced up as a tall brunette, with dark, exotic skin approached and settled opposite him in the shadowed booth. He waited as the man ordered a drink, then waited a bit longer until it was delivered, before he engaged the privacy field that would block their conversation from the ears of others in the seedy bar.

“That’s one I haven’t seen before,” Katze admitted and toasted his visitor.
“Inspired by Avalon?”

“Somewhat,” Iason returned as he crossed one long leg over the other and sipped his drink. “Have you found him?”

“If I had I would have alerted you.”

Katze rolled his head on his neck. He hadn’t been sleeping worth a damn lately, ever since he had revealed his secret to Raoul. He couldn’t help feeling that the Blondie was just going to show up again and press him for more information or tests, but since he’d asked Raoul to help him with his black outs, he hadn’t heard from the tenacious Elite. He refused to admit that he was disappointed.

“He’s definitely still on planet. There have been no flights carrying anyone with his description off planet.” Katze leaned forward on the table. “Unless he can change his appearance like you?”

“No. To my knowledge I am the only one who has that particular ability.”

“So he’s still here.” Katze doubted that someone as big and heavy as an elite could be smuggled out either without someone noticing. “He can’t be in Ceres, Apalatia or any of the outlining cities, because he would stand out to much and someone would have noticed him and reported in.”

“Agreed.”

“If someone is holding him somewhere, I’ve heard nothing about it and my contacts keep both ears to the ground. I’ve had ever abandoned building checked in a hundred mile radius, and there is no sign of him.”

Iason nodded and, for some reason, thought of Guy and Dana Bahn. “Keep looking. If he is still on planet he has to be somewhere.”

“Can I ask,” Katze paused, sipped his drink. “Why don’t you just put out a general alert on Issac? It would be a hell of a lot faster than going through my contacts.”

“A Blondie has gone missing from Eos. This is not something we can advertise as it will allude to insecurity and a lack of control.” Iason shook his head. “No, for now we will do it this way.”

“He’s been gone two months. Have you received any kind of demand?”

“None, which is perplexing. I would think that anyone who had the influence to abduct him from a secured facility in Eos must want something, but there has been nothing.” Iason pinched the bridge of his nose. “They wrecked his room, so he must have put up a fight, which is also puzzling as the reports I received indicated he had been near catatonic.”

“And footage of what happened is irretrievable?”

“Yes. Some sort of virus must have been uploaded to jam the cameras, we have nothing but static. Even our best people cannot recover the data.”

Katze reached for the bowl of fried vegetable sticks and chewed thoughtfully. “Have you considered letting Riki look at it?”

Iason blinked. “No. why would I do that?”

“Well, he’s got some serious skills when it comes to hacking a system.”

“This is far more than that. Riki does have some skill with computer systems and machinery but this is well beyond his scope.”

“Are you sure?” Katze thought about how easily Riki had bypassed the specialized security on his office. “I couldn’t hurt to try. We’ve exhausted all other options and have no more leads. We need more information and that information would be on the hard drive that had been monitoring that room.”

Iason sipped his drink and considered the idea. Right now only his brothers knew that Issac was missing, and all information was on lock down beyond that. They had each agreed to subtly make inquiries, with Iason using his underground contacts as well, but after two months there was still no sign of the son of Jupiter.

“You don’t have to tell him what it is, just ask him to see if he can clean it up for you.”

“If he managed to clean up the drive it would tell us more,” Iason agreed, but he feared it would also put Riki in danger. They had no idea what might be on the hard drive of Issac’s abduction, and anything Riki might see would be dangerous for him if anyone learned he was aware of it. “I will consider it. For now, continue with your people and learn what you can.”

“Understood.”

Iason pulled a data stick disc from his pocket and slid it across the table to Katze. This is the information you requested for the K’Lu deal. Their products better be worth the trade.”

“I’ll verify them before I make the trade,” Katze assured as he slid the disk into his own pocket.

They finished off their drinks in relative silence, then Iason said.

“I neglected to ask, how was your vacation?”

Katze blinked, surprised that Iason would be interested and his surprise quickly turned to guilt and suspicion. Had Raoul broken his word and told Iason the truth about his anatomy? Was that why the Blondie hadn’t been in touch with him for so long, after so many weeks of hounding him and having him followed? It would certainly explain it.

“It was awful,” Katze replied, mildly, showing none of his anxiety. “Don’t ever make me do that again.” When Iason actually laughed, he relaxed slightly.

“You should find a hobby,” the Blondie suggested. “There is more to life than work.”

“Is there?” Katze pretended to be astounded. “Pot, kettle.”

“Excuse me?”

Katze grinned and shook his head. “Just pointing out that you work more than anyone on or off planet.”

“Yes, but I make time to play, I can assure you.”

“By the way, how is Riki adjusting to his new status?”

Iason’s smile faded. “He has adapted well. There have been a few incidents, but nothing too bothersome.”

“You don’t sound like you’re happy about it.”

“I am pleased that he now demands respect and I will no longer be condemned for keeping a mongrel pet, however...”

“However,” Katze returned as he reached for another chip. “You now have less control over Riki.”

Iason’s hand tightened on his empty glass. “Correct.”

“And it upsets you.”

“No.” Iason shook his head. “I would not use that term, it is more an annoyance. I am used to Riki being there for when I come home, and for relying on me for things. Now he is quite often gone off to work and he is making his own money, so he no longer requires my care.”

“Just because he’s becoming somewhat independent doesn’t mean he doesn’t still need you to take care of him, Iason. We both know his penchant for trouble.”

“True enough, but I am speaking in more general terms. Riki does not accept much from me unless I force the issue, make him wear the clothes I buy for him, for instance.”

“He eats the food you pay for, he sleeps in your bed and lives in your house.”

“He has no other choice but to do so.”

Katze couldn’t believe he was even having this conversation with Iason, let alone that he was stuck in the position of defending Riki once again, but that seemed to be his lot with these two. He wanted Iason to be happy, which he wouldn’t be if Riki were not with him.

“You’re looking at the glass half empty,” Katze insisted calmly. “Sure he’s making his own money and has something to occupy his time now, instead of just waiting for you in the condo, but he comes home to you every day, right. He chooses to stay with you, even with all the freedoms he has gained, so that has to say something. He chose to come back from Avalon with you, when he could have stayed there and been a Prince.”

“I know you are right, and yet I cannot help but feel...resentful that his attentions are now divided between myself and his new job. I do not know what sort of people he is dealing with, or what he is doing with them at all hours of the day.”

“He’s fixing their systems, Iason.” Was the Blondie worried because of the recent rumors that were going on about Riki? “That’s *all* he’s doing. You have to learn to trust him.”

“I do trust Riki! It is the others that concern me.” Iason met Katze’s gaze and scowled. He had not realized that this was bothering him so much until he started talking about it, and now that he was talking about it he couldn’t seem to stop. “Riki is a very beautiful, highly sexual specimen. He is a prime target for immoral deviants.”

Like Blondies, Katze wanted to say but kept it to himself. He found it ironic that Iason was worried someone might do to Riki what Iason had already done to him. “Riki can take care of himself.” Except against a Blondie, Katze added silently. “He knows you’d kill anyone that laid a finger on him.”

“I would, yes.” Iason brooded for a moment then his expression cleared. “What of the other matter? Lane Debaur.”

Katze nodded. “I found him, it wasn’t hard as he likes to gamble.”

“Where is he?”

“Alpha Prime, hiding from a number of debtors from other systems.”

“Have him picked up.”

“Public or private?”

“Private.”

Which meant no witnesses to the man’s abduction. Katze nodded. “Cold or warm cargo?” he asked, which meant if he should let the guy ride as a passenger in a comfortable environment in pretence of business or friendship, or in a storage box with no temperature controls, thus enforcing their target’s loss of control and increasing his fear.

“Make it uncomfortable but don’t injure him or let him die. I wish to speak with him.”

“Okay, I can have him here by the end of the week.”

Iason nodded, that would be just before the Eclipse, perfect. “Do it.” Iason took out his data pad, and his fingers flew over it. “I’ve added an extra fifty thousand credits to your account, if you need more let me know.”

“I won’t need that much, but …”

“What are your plans for the eclipse?”

Katze grinned. “Blackout conditions? Best time to get a hand up in this business.”

“You have people for that, do you not?”

“Sure,” Katze returned, but he liked to keep his hand in as well sometimes, just to keep his skills sharp. Plus in a total black out like the Eclipse will bring, very few people can be truly trusted to do what their told and only take what was required. “Why?”

“I’d like you to join Riki and I for the event.”

Katze blinked once, twice. This was a first. “If you wish.” He thought of a possible reason, though it didn’t make much sense as it was a security risk. “Did you want me to bring Debaur in then?”

“No, not into my home. Set up a place beyond the city limits, I want no record of him coming to Tanagura. All of that should be finished by the Eclipse, so you may come to the condo and prepare to stay the night.”

Katze cleared his throat, confused. “Iason, can I just ask...why?”

“Riki wishes to invite his friend Carrie for the celebration, he is concerned about her being on her own for it; there are often break-ins during the Eclipse. Also I thought we would have a little party as well to celebrate, make things more festive. Perhaps it will help alleviate some of the stress from the last few months.”

“Oh, okay.” That wasn’t so bad, he’d played pool at Iason’s before and the Blondie had a fantastic game room. “How is Cal, by the way?”

“He is overcompensating to his new position, but slowly adjusting.”

“Yeah, well, it’s hard to stop being a Furniture.”

“He did well as Riki’s Tutor, but now I feel he is unsure of what his exact role is. We have tried to explain to him that while we do require him to help with the household and to continue Riki’s lessons, which he had been doing, but Riki’s attempts to include him other things have thus failed.”

“What other things?”

“Playing games or learning about electronics and the like. Mostly just spending time with us when we are home together.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t disapprove of it, but nor do I see the necessity of it.” Iason rose and Katze disengaged the stepped out of the booth and nodded to Katze. “Good to see you again.”

“Give my best to your partner,” Katze offered, to keep the façade going.

“He already has the best,” Iason returned cheekily and with a wave walked out.

The server appeared beside the table and Katze ordered another drink and a plate of skewers. It arrived far too quickly for it to be anywhere close to freshly made, but it was something to fill the hole in his stomach and so he reached for one and lifted it to his mouth.

“Don’t put that in your mouth.”

A white gloved hand snatched the skewer away and Katze’s gaze shot up to see Raoul hovering over him. Damn it, didn’t this idiot understand anything about discretion? There were already rumors that he worked for an Iason or some other Elite, if Raoul kept showing up they’d start think it was him.

“Why are you here?” Katze demanded and was startled when Raoul grabbed his wrist and hauled him out of the booth. “Hey! Let go you...”

“Excuse me, sir.” A serving droid approached. “This customer has not yet paid.”

Raoul glared down at it. “Do you dare interrupt me?”

“Of course not, Sir, you are free to go about your business, but this customer must pay for the food and drinks he consumed.” A small laser knife appeared from the guts of the droid. “Or a penalty will be issued.”

“Let me pay, for Jupiter’s sake!” Katze insisted trying to tug his arm free, and when Raoul refused to release it, he tried to reach his credit stick with his free hand in his opposite pocket.

“I am Raoul Am, a Blondie of Tanagura. You may issue a request for remittance from my Furniture Peter.”

The droid paused as he made an internal link connection, spoke with Peter who saw his master by the droid and quickly allowed payment. “Payment has been received. Have a nice day.”

“Why do you frequent such disgusting places?” Raoul asked as he stormed from the bar, still dragging Katze behind him.

“It wouldn’t have been a problem if you had just acted like a normal person and let me pay, before you kidnapped me!”

Raoul paused by his vehicle, turned and stared at Katze. “You are angry.”

“Yes, I’m angry! Do you have any idea how many people saw that? Don’t you think they’re going to wonder why a Blondie just walked into a place like this, grabbed up a patron and stormed out?”

“I am not concerned with their conclusions.” Raoul opened the door and shoved Katze inside, then walked around to the driver side. He slid behind the wheel. “Why have you been ignoring my calls?”

“What calls?” Katze shot back, even as Raoul ripped away from the curb, then hit vertical and shot into the air to get away from pedestrians and traffic. “I haven’t gotten any calls from you!”

“I have called you over a dozen times! You demanded my word that I would no longer follow you or seek you out, but you promised me you would answer my calls, or at least return them. Why did you break your word?”

“No.” Katze stared at him confused and brought up his communications log on his wrist unit. “I really haven’t gotten any calls from you, I swear.” He searched the history and there were only his recent calls and the unregistered number which was Iason’s. “Look, there’s nothing here. I never got even one call.”

Raoul snatched Katze’s wrist to bring the unit closer and skimmed through the log, while keeping his eye in front of him for driving. Katze was telling the truth, there were no calls from him. How was that possible? He had tried to contact Katze multiple times. “I do not understand.” He set the car to auto pilot and tapped his wrist unit. “Call Katze.”

Raoul kept hold of Katze’s wrist and waited for the unit to acknowledge an incoming transmission, but it remained silent, even as the Blondie’s wrist unit confirmed a connection and then offered to accept a message.

“Pick up,” Raoul ordered and ended the transmission, then stared at Katze’s link. It didn’t signal to confirm a new message. “I don’t understand. It is your code.” He glanced at Katze. “Have you changed your call code?”

“No.” Katze stared at his link then at Raoul’s wrist unit. “Can I see that for a minute?”

“My wrist unit?”

“Yes.”

Raoul unfastened the watch, slipped it off and handed it to the red-head beside him.

“Call me again,” Katze requested as he pressed the transmission button.

“Call Katze,” Raoul said and watched as Katze held the wrist unit to his ear.
“What are you...?”

“There!” Katze ended the call, then hit transmit again. “Call Katze,” he said and held it up to Raoul’s ear, which was probably unnecessary as the Blondie had superior hearing, but Raoul leaned closer and heard the usual humming of waiting for the call to connect, then a click, then the humming again and finally an offer to leave a message. “Did you hear it?”

“The click?” Raoul asked and Katze nodded.

“It’s being redirected.” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small, flat looking box. “Someone’s messed with it and your calls are being redirected.”

Raoul’s expression darkened, who would dare? “Can you tell where they are being redirected to?”

Katze already had the back of the wrist unit off and was studying the circuit board. “Maybe.” He poked at the circuitry with one of his tools then turned it over so he could see the screen, as a roll of data appeared. “Okay, okay, yes, that’s as it should be.” He continued to fiddle with it and muttered to himself as he studied the details on screen. “That’s weird.”

“What is weird?” Raoul leaned closer, curious. “What do you see?”

“Well, it looks like your calls are being redirected to a hidden subfolder on your unit.”

“You mean I was calling myself when I thought I was calling you?”

Katze nodded. “Looks like. Give me a minute to see if I can access...there, yeah. See? Thirty two...” His eyes widened as he stared at the number of calls for his number and voice messages. He stared at the Blondie. “Obsess much?”

“I am not obsessed!” Raoul snatched back the wrist unit and studied it. “You asked me to help you and I had wanted to speak with you regarding that issue, but you were not responding.” He snapped the rear plate back onto the unit and dropped it in the tray between them. “I was concerned something may have happened to you.”

“You were worried about me?”

“Because you usually know better than to keep me waiting.” Raoul removed auto pilot and took over the driving again. “When I spoke with Jason he said that he had been in contact with you frequently, then I was just angry.”

“Well, it wasn’t my fault, but I’m sorry it caused you trouble.”

Raoul nodded. “I will have my technicians look at that unit and purchase a new one.”

“Yeah, probably a good idea.” For the first time since Katze had been thrown into the car he took notice of where they were going. “Are we headed to Midas?”

“No. I have a place there where we can work in private.”

“Work?”

Raoul glanced at him. “You requested I assist you with your episodes. I have done some research into the phenomenon and believe I may have some suggestions to help.”

“Oh.” So he hadn’t forgotten, Katze thought and tried to decide if he felt relieved or uneasy. The uneasiness won out. “I really can’t right now, I have to...”

“Whatever it is cancel it.”

Raoul’s tone warned Katze that the Blondie’s temper was hanging on by a thread so he quickly sent some messages and rescheduled his appointments.

“What are you going to do to me?” he asked quietly, once his schedule was cleared.

“First I am going to feed you some edible food,” Raoul decided as they finally returned to the ground and merged into lighter traffic. “Then we will discuss the options I have selected and see which you will prefer.”

“I’m not going to have to get naked again, am I?”

Raoul shot him a look and raised an eyebrow. “Only if you wish to, it will not be required.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Silence fell between them again, and suddenly Raoul smiled.

“Katze?”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you miss me?”

“No!” Katze shot up rigidly in his seat, then cursed inwardly because he knew he had answered far too quickly for Raoul to believe him.

“Good. I missed you too.”

Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Guy and Shiao are settling into their new place, but it is not what Guy was expecting.

Notes for the Chapter:

A bit of fun with this one, and anyone who catches the Princess Bride Reference- Kudos! I had a silly moment and couldn't resist. As always, please review if you enjoy and thank you so so much for the ones you have already given!

Guy set the last of Shiao's books on the shelf then dropped to the bare wooden floor and laid back. Their new place wasn't as spacious as the one they'd had before. It was all the same level and only had two rooms, one for living and one for sleeping. The walls and ceiling was this hard, mud gray and the small kitchenette was unlike anything he had seen before, it seemed to work on actual fire rather than energy. Still, it was enough space for him and Shiao, if you didn't count all the books that Shiao had brought with them.

Guy could read, obviously, but he'd never really enjoyed it and when he did read he preferred reading mechanical journals off his data pad. Riki had loved reading, and had cherished actual books because they were so rare in Ceres. Most people knew they could get a pretty premium favour out of the Bison leader if they offered an actual book as payment.

He linked his hands across his stomach and stared up at the gray ceiling, thought about the garage he had worked out of and converted into an apartment for himself. While sex was the main currency in Ceres, he had enough mechanical skills that he could trade them as well. Riki of course could work anything with a computerized system, he was an amazing hacker and he had used those skills to his advantage, but bartering them could lead to trouble, especially if someone wanted you to break into a credited account or something. Riki could be as light fingered as any

mongrel, he had quick hands and an expressionless face so no one could ever prove he took something unless they caught him in the act, which they never did. He could decode a car, or get Bison into an event without tickets, but hacking credit systems carried a very harsh penalty so he stayed away from that.

Guy raised his hands over his head, used them as a cushion and realized that the usual guilty twinges and sorrowful heart skips that seemed to emerge whenever he thought of his former pairing partner had almost completely faded. He still missed Riki of course, they had spent their formative years together, but he was no longer obsessing on if he might ever see his old friend again.

Maybe that was because of Shiao and how their relationship had changed. Well, Guy called it a relationship, he wasn't sure Shiao completely understood what they were to each other yet. He'd been hesitant to let himself feel more than friendship for the Onyx, after all, Shiao was an Elite, and android and Guy was a Human mongrel. What may work for Iason Mink and Riki would not work for everyone. Or maybe that was why Guy had finally been able to let go of his animosity about Riki's relationship with Mink. Now that he had fallen for an Elite, Guy could understand that there was more to Jupiter's Children than was publicly perceived.

Still, Guy was content with the way things were going. There was no real pressure to talk about their feelings or define what they had together. The sex was fantastic and he was reasonably sure that Shiao wouldn't suddenly dump him or start fucking other people. The Onyx had taken a considerable risk revealing his true desire to Guy, and he was still very insecure about the whole thing. Shiao was horribly afraid of hurting, or even killing Guy, so Guy had to make sure not to even joke about certain things and risk having the Onyx backing off again.

When Shiao had told him they'd have to move, he wasn't all that upset over it, a place to live was just that, a place to live. A roof over your head, warmth in the winter and if you were really lucky food in your cupboards. Now he had all that and more and he was finally getting used to living like a normal person instead of a mongrel. When you came from nothing,

having even a little something was a good thing and Shiao was there of course so that made it even better.

“Is there a problem?”

Guy glanced sideways and grinned. “Nope, just taking a break from lugging around all your damn books.”

Shiao tilted his head, as if considering the statement, then he walked over, sat down next to Guy and lay back as well, mimicking the Human’s position. “I expressed that I would do it later.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been saying that for the last month and a half!”

“I had other things to attend to.”

“Right, so I did it and now it’s done.” Guy sighed and turned his gaze back to the ceiling. “I’m not crazy of the color. Should we change it?”

“The color of the ceiling?”

“And maybe the walls too.”

“What do you recommend?”

“How about yellow?”

“Yellow?”

“Not like a deep yellow, but a pale one, like maybe a mix between white and gold.”

Shiao considered it, imagined what it might be like. “I think that would be nice.”

Guy grinned. “Yeah? I’ll have to pick up some paint. Where is the nearest...”

“I will pick something up for you.”

“You don’t know what shade I want.”

“There may be a limitation to what can be found here, but I am sure I can find some way to change the colour to one you approve of.”

Guy sat up and stared down at Shiao. “I’m still not allowed to go out?”

He had slept through their arrival, or more than likely Shiao had tranqed him because they’d had to fly through an asteroid field at one point and while Guy considered himself a tough guy and bit of a thrill seeker, he had been terrified of being crushed by the enormous space rocks. He’d woken up in their new place and had not been allowed to go outside since. There were only three windows in the entire apartment and when he looked out all he could see were trees. Shiao locked the door whenever he left and wouldn’t give Guy the key; he’d never seen a door secured without a passcode or data pad. Guy didn’t feel like a prisoner, and he hadn’t become afraid of Shiao or his intentions, he was just annoyed by it.

Shiao also sat up; even sitting he towered over Guy. “It is not about permission, Guy.”

“Then what is it about? I have no idea what the area is even like, or where any of the merchants are because you won’t let me not to leave the house!”

Shiao leaned forward and put his hand over Guy’s knee. “A while longer, please? I know you are frustrated and bored, but there is a procedure for new comers here.”

“You go out all the time!”

“I can be discrete and move unseen, Guy. You cannot.”

“Why?”

Shiao almost smiled. “Because you are the only Human here.”

Guy blinked. “Seriously? The only one? Why did you pick this place then?”

“One, because it would not be a logical choice, since I have a Human companion. It is also well shielded because of the asteroid field and few even know this planet is inhabited.” Shiao gently tugged on the pony tail that Guy had started to grow. “And two, their leader owed me a favor.

Guy scratched his hand. “I guess that makes sense, but you bring in food that I can eat so they must have some Humans, traders at least?”

“The species of this planet are Humanoid, and they eat similar vegetables and proteins, but they are of a different appearance than you, Guy. You would stand out too much.”

“So am I supposed to stay holed up here forever? I can’t ever go outside?”

“Of course not, I will take you out soon, but I must get them to accept you first and that takes time.”

Guy sighed, turned his back to Shiao, then let himself drop backwards onto the Onyx’s lap. “What if they never accept me? What if they think I’m weird or a threat or something?” Was it going to be like Ceres, where he would be bullied and harassed and he’d have to use violence or sex to protect himself? He didn’t want to go back to that life, he was so over that kind of existence.

Shiao caressed Guy’s hair. “They will not. I have assured them that you are a good, kind and trusting man, and once they do accept you, then you can move about freely.” He paused. “Well, perhaps not freely.”

Guy rolled his eyes. “What does that mean? Am I gonna have a fucking curfew or something? Am I your pet here and only allowed...”

“No. No, of course not.” Shiao continued his caress. “I only mean that there are dangers here that you must become accustomed to before you can move about easily and without danger.”

Danger? The only Human on an entire planet that people thought wasn’t even inhabited? What the hell kind of place had Shiao dropped them in? “I don’t like this.”

“I know, but it was the only place I could be absolutely sure that Jupiter and her minions could not reach us.”

Guy was relieved for that at least, because he didn’t want the AI to get her hands on Shiao again. He sat up. “Can I at least go outside? All I can see are trees from the windows.”

Shiao seemed to consider it, then rose and pulled Guy up with him. “Only a few minutes.” He clasped Guy’s hand in his large one. “You must not move unless I tell you too, and you must not let go of my hand.”

“What? Why?”

“Your word, Guy or we are staying right here.”

“Fine! Whatever, I promise. Now can we go out?”

They walked to the front door and Shiao used his key to unlock it. He pulled it open stepped out and slowly pulled Guy with him.

There was a video that Riki showed him once, some classic screen from old Earth about a girl who fell down a rabbit hole into this fantastic world where all kinds of weird shit started to happen to her. This is what Guy felt like as he stepped out beside Shiao and stared at the forest of trees in front of him, behind him and on either side of him, seeing them through the window he had not realized that the trees were not just a landscape, but that they were in the trees themselves! He glanced back at the small, smooth hut behind them, balanced neatly between the branches of the mammoth tree and protected on all sides by additional branches and shaded from above by a canopy of multi-coloured leaves.

He looked down at his feet and saw that he stood on a tree branch, probably six feet wide and so long he couldn’t tell where it stopped. As he looked down he realized he couldn’t see the ground. He swayed, felt Shiao’s arm slip around his waist and tighten.

“W...where?” he gasped, his head spinning from a sudden case of vertigo, so he turned his gaze skywards, and saw very small patches of a russet sky.

“What...what is this place?”

“In this sector it is called Mas ‘que Treshfen.’” Shiao decided not to reveal that the translation was planet of death. “However, the locals call it Plantacia because it is a planet of forests and swamps.”

“S...swamps? What’s a swamp?”

“A dark, muddy like water hole where certain times of fauna and amphibious creatures live.”

“A...are they dangerous?”

“Yes, very. There are patches of sand that will suck you down beneath it, as well as agile, carnivorous creatures which can leap on you in an instant.”

Something squawked and flew past them, an enormous black bird, unlike anything he had ever seen, but it seemed uninterested in them as it continued weaving through the trees until it disappeared.

Guy tried desperately to gather his composure and courage. “So...” He straightened from Shiao, but did not let go of the Onyx’s hand, and ran his free hand through his hair. “We...we live in a tree...” He swallowed, hard as he tried to come to terms with what he was seeing, what he had been told. “On a planet with um...man eating creatures, and magic, sucking sand and um...birds that are bigger than my entire body?”

“Yes.”

“Anything else I should be worried about?”

“Just the ROUS’s.”

“What are they?” Guy hated the whine in his voice but now he was wishing Shiao had ignored him and just kept him locked inside.

“Rodent’s of unusual size. They tend to wander the edges of the swamp land, but they cannot climb trees so we are safe.”

“Rodents of unusual size. Right, sure, makes perfect sense.” Guy turned suddenly and glared at Shiao. “What the fuck were you thinking bringing me here?”

“I admit it is not an ideal setting for a Human, but it does have some good aspects as well and...”

“Ideal? Ideal?” Guy’s voice actually squeaked. “My choice is to be a shut in, or risk going outside and become swallowed by huge birds, suffocated by weird sand or eaten by fucking giant rats!”

“There are ways to avoid those dangers,” Shiao reasoned calmly. “I will show you and...”

Guy released Shiao’s hand and darted back inside. He dropped down on the floor and put his head between his knees. “I can’t stay here. I can’t stay here!”

“Guy, please, give me some time to...”

“They don’t want me here!” Guy snapped, his head coming up. He hadn’t seen any other huts in the surrounding trees. “Is there even anyone else here? If so, where are they because they sure aren’t near us?”

“We are outside their village, but we are not far from it. They are a good people, Guy. They will learn to trust you and you will come to trust them, as I do. They just need time...”

“We’ve been here almost two months!” He was assuming that was how long they had been there, based on his wrist unit, which at least still told time.

“It has actually only been a few weeks, Guy. The days and nights are much longer here than on Amoï.”

“Weeks?” Guy moaned and dropped his head again. What sort of place at Shiao taken them to? How was he supposed to adjust to such a strange and terrifying environment? “I want to go home!”

Shiao crouched beside him, touched his shoulder. “I miscalculated. I should not have brought you here if it distresses you so. I will arrange for you to return to Amoï...”

“Not there!” Again, Guy’s head whipped up. “I can’t go back there! You know I can’t!”

“Very well, where we were before? I will arrange an apartment and you can go back to work at the cycle shop...”

Guy grabbed Shiao’s tunic in his fist. “You’d really send me away? After everything we’ve done? Everything we are to each other?” He suspected that Shiao didn’t, couldn’t love him, but having it confirmed so brutally was like a thousand knives embedded in his chest. “You’d just fucking throw me away like I’m garbage?”

Shiao’s eyes flashed and he suddenly gripped both Guy’s shoulders. “You are *not* garbage.” He stated, firmly. “You are very precious to me, Guy. I have told you that before.”

“Then why are you trying to get rid of me?”

If an Onyx could feel frustration, Shiao felt sure he would be pulling his hair out at this point. Instead, he rubbed his hands up and down Guy in an attempt to calm the mongrel. “If you are frightened to be here, if you want to leave, then of course I will arrange it.”

“But what about you? Would you just stay here, by yourself?”

“Yes.”

His calm, factual reply infuriated Guy and he pounded his fists against Shiao’s chest. “You prick! You miserable fucking, asshole prick!”

“Why are you hitting me?”

“Does it hurt, you prick? Does it hurt your fucking impenetrable android body?”

“No.” Shiao caught Guy’s hands and held them still against his chest. “But it does hurt my feelings.”

Having him admit that was a break through, Guy realized, but he was too upset to be happy about it. “I love you,” Guy muttered as he rested his head just above his imprisoned hands. “I love you, you motherfucker. How can you just send me away?”

“I do not wish to send you away, I only wish you to be happy.”

“I’m happy being where you are.”

“You stated otherwise, moments ago.”

“Because I’m scared! If there was one place in the entire universe that was not a good place for us to live, it’s this one!” Guy lifted his head and glared at the obtuse Onyx. “And I just told you I loved you.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you think you should say something back?”

Shiao seemed to consider the question. “Thank you?” He almost smiled as Guy struggled to release his hands, no doubt so he could start the assault again. Shiao leaned forward and kissed Guy’s sneering mouth, making the mongrel grow still. “Do you wish me to say I love you as well?”

Guy hid his face in the Onyx’s chest again and muttered something unintelligible.

“I do not know what love is, Guy, so to say such a thing would be dishonest.” He caught Guy’s chin, tilted the mongrel’s face until he could see those beautiful green eyes. “I want you. I desire you and I am pleased when you are with me. These are all emotions that I can confirm, and...” He kissed Guy gently on the mouth. “I do not wish to live without you by my side.”

That was love, Guy wanted to scream, but he didn’t. Instead he pulled his hands free of Shiao’s grip so he could wrap them around the Elite. “It’s

“Enough,” he murmured and again buried his face against Shiao’s chest. “Don’t send me away. Please. I want to be with you. I want all that too.”

“Very well.” Shiao returned the embrace and nodded. “This is a dangerous environment, but there is beauty here too, and safety. I will make us a good home here, Guy.”

“If they accept me, you mean?”

“They will accept you, and if they do not, we will go elsewhere, but I truly believe this will be the best, and safest place for us.”

“Okay.” Guy pulled back, patted his face, relieved that at least he wasn’t crying. “I’ll try to be patient.”

“Thank you, Guy.” Shiao started to rise and Guy pulled him back down.

“Where are you going?”

“I was going to prepare our meal.” Guy had not yet figured out how to cook with fire, so Shiao was doing the majority of the cooking.

“Later,” Guy decided as he crawled into Shiao’s lap and started to pull off the Onyx’s tunic. “You owe me.”

“I *owe* you?” Shiao repeated bemused, and draped his arms around Guy’s waist. “Explain, please.”

“You pissed me off, and worse, you scared the shit out of me when we went outside.”

“You insisted on going outside.”

“Not the point. It’s your fault, so you owe me.”

“Very well. Let it not be said that I do not pay my debts.”

“Fucking right,” Guy growled as Shiao captured his mouth and slowly lowered him to the floor.

Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul tries to find the reason for Katze's back outs

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi Everyone,

I know several people may not be reading this story because I mentioned character deaths. I hope you will keep in mind that there are a mixture of my characters and original characters that can cover and that sometimes death of a character is not necessarily a BAD thing. I WILL tell you that Riki and Iason will not be among them. I hope this eases your minds a little. Here is a nice long chapter for all of you and thank you for your patience regarding updating. I am really nervous about this last and final story so I would really like to hear from you what you think. :-)

Raoul watched Katze finish off his steak and smiled. “I enjoy watching you eat.”

Katze set his fork and knife down and wiped his mouth with a napkin.
“Why?”

“I’m not entirely sure, perhaps because you seem to like it so much?”

“Food is food.”

“I disagree, and based on the meal you cooked for me before, you do not truly feel that way.” Raoul crossed one long leg over the other and reached for his wine.

The restaurant he decided to take Katze too was on the high-end scale, only Elites and very, very rich merchants ate here. The food was delicious and

while many found it pricy, the cost was insignificant to an Elite. However, Raoul was enchanted by how much Katze had enjoyed his meal.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to take me up on my offer?”

“What offer?” Katze pulled out a cigarette, glanced at Raoul who nodded, and lit it.

“Won’t you offer me one?”

Katze’s eyebrow rose, he never knew an Elite to smoke. “Would you like one?”

“I would.”

Resisting the urge to give the Blondie one of his Black Moon cigarettes; it probably wouldn’t affect the android anyway, he handed over one of his good ones and reached across the table with his lighter. “I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I don’t, but I am open to new experiences,” Raoul paused and caught Katze’s gaze over the rim of his wine glass. “Of all kinds.”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Whatever it is you think you’re doing.”

“I think I am enjoying a glass of wine and a cigarette over a fine meal, with a friend.”

Katze wasn’t stupid and he knew Raoul knew he wasn’t stupid. “The innuendoes,” he stated. “Stop it.”

“Innuendos?” Raoul set his wine down, took a puff of his cigarette. “What innuendos?” When Katze simply glared at him, he smiled. “Really, my friend, you’ve become entirely too sensitive since revealing yourself to me. Perhaps we should look into that behavior as well while we’re at the lab?”

Katze grabbed his own glass of wine. “Shut up.” Raoul was playing him and fully aware of it. “You...” His words were knocked out of him as a gloved hand slapped his face, throwing him sideways in the booth.

“How dare you speak to an Elite that way!”

Katze put a hand to his cheek, even as his other hand curled into a fist against the seat. He stared up at Po Laren, another, very high-ranking Blondie. “I...” He quickly curbed his anger and began to apologize, but Raoul was also now on his feet

“How dare *you* strike my guest when he is with me.”

Po Laren turned to his brother, incensed. “Do not expect me to believe that you allow a blotter to speak to you in such a fashion, Raoul.”

Raoul’s eyes flickered to Katze, saw an almost imperceptible flinch before the black-market dealer had schooled his features into a blank expression and had straightened in the booth. Blotter was a very old, outdated insult towards Humans, its meaning was essentially insignificance and lower than even the smallest microbe. It was not a term often used in today’s society and Raoul suddenly took offense on Katze’s behalf.

He turned back to Po Laren. “How I allow anyone to speak to me is no one’s concern but my own.” He paused, as he saw his brother’s eyes flash red. Odd, he thought.

Elites were famous for quibbling among themselves, but they rarely became involved in one another’s personal affairs. Iason, being the exception. Over all, they were quite polite and respectful to each other. It was unlike Po, or any Blondie to create a scene in a public venue like this.

“Are you well, brother?”

“It is not I who’s health is in question, but your own. Do not think I will allow such behavior to continue, Raoul! Iason was bad enough, but we will not accept it from you!”

What a strange thing to say. “Who are we?” Raoul asked intrigued at Po Laren’s concerningly aggressive stance. “And what behavior are you referring to? I was merely having dinner with a friend and you chose to interrupt, assault and insult us. It is you who’s behavior is in question.”

Po Laren pointed a finger at Raoul, accusingly. “Be careful, Raoul. I can crush you on a whim.”

“You are having delusions as well? Fascinating.” Realizing that he was baiting his brother instead of ending the uncomfortable situation, as proper courtesy dictated he should, Raoul returned to his seat. “I will assume you are not yourself, and will overlook this instance, however I suggest you seek guidance from Jupiter.”

“It is you who will be seeking...” Po Laren started to shout and Raoul’s eyes widened. A Blondie *never* raised his voice, he never needed to as his very presence commanded respect.

Before Raoul could respond, however, two other Elites came by and caught the agitated Blondie by the shoulders. They whispered to him and the three turned and walked away.

“How very, very odd.” Remembering Katze Raoul faced his friend across the table. “How is your face?”

“I’ll live.” Katze returned quietly, his eyes lowered. It was his own fault, really. He had simply forgotten who he was, where and with whom he was having dinner. Raoul brought out the worst in him sometimes, and made him forget protocol. He needed to curb that and fast. “May I go?”

“*May* you go?” Raoul scowled that Katze now felt he had to ask permission. “We will both go.” He rose, waited for Katze to follow. “My second lab is not far from here. Let us go put our minds to better things.”

Katze nodded and followed him out. The drive to Raoul’s secret lab was quiet, too quiet, but Katze honestly didn’t know what to say. Po Laren had every right to strike him, but he hadn’t been slapped in...well, a very, very

long time and while as a Furniture he had long ago put away feelings of shame or embarrassment, turned out he could still feel humiliated.

A soft caress on his cheek caught his attention and he whipped his head sideways.

“It’s starting to bruise,” Raoul scowled. “I have something at the lab that will help.”

“It’s fine.”

Raoul said nothing as they pulled up to a low rise condo. He stepped out, waited for Katze to follow, then they entered. They walked passed a droid at reception, and then through a key coded door. Down two flights of stairs, and then Raoul coded in another series of numbers, seventeen, if Katze counted correctly, and they moved through that door.

“Where?” Katze began, then quickly snapped his mouth shut. It wasn’t his business where they were or how Raoul managed to find such a place.

He followed Raoul across the darkened room and paused as a dim, green light bathed the small basement storage area. The entire back wall had shifted to reveal another set of steps, and at the bottom, a tunnel that led to Raoul’s lab.

“It was one of the few original buildings left over from before the occupation.” Raoul stated, in answer to Katze’s unfinished question, as they entered through yet another secured door he requested lights. “It is a perfect location as no one knows that this portion if the structure exists.”

“What about the people living above?”

“No one lives above.”

“But...” Again, Katze caught himself.

“Continue,” Raoul ordered.

“It looks like a condo complex.”

“It is, but I own it. I make it seem there are people living here but there is not. It keeps people away and those that wander in are told by the droid at the desk that there are no vacancies.”

“Then why bother going to all this extra security?”

“Because it is fun.” Raoul moved passed a set of exam tables and indicated a chair in front of a large holo-screen, tapped it with his hand. “Sit here.” When Katze complied without comment, Raoul scowled. “Now you stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop thinking about my idiot brother. I have no issues with how you speak to me, but I will be very, very angry if you continue to act like a compliant Furniture. We are beyond such things, are we not? After all, I’ve...”

“Seen me naked.”

“Yes! Exactly my point.”

“How did I know that would be your point?”

Pleased that Katze had listened and dropped the pretense, Raoul opened one of the many wall cabinets and retrieved a small two-inch medical scanner. He caught Katze’s chin when the Human started to turn away, and held the scanner about a centimetre from Katze’s bruised face. An amber light appeared across the skin, slowly pushing back the darkening tissue until both sides were once again the same, pale colour.

“I said it was fine.”

“I disagreed.” Raoul continued to hold Katze’s chin in his hands as he examined both sides of the man’s face, studied the jagged scar. “I could heal this for you as well, if you like?”

“No.” Katze tore his head away and sat further back in the chair. He put a hand to his scared cheek, protectively. Iason had given him that scar, he was

proud of it and would never part with it.

Raoul shrugged. “As you wish.” He set the scanner on a raised table and moved to his console. “I will show you some images, let me know if they make you feel anything.”

“As in?”

“Distaste, discomfort, fear, anxiety, happiness, the usual.”

“Okay.”

The lights dimmed the holo screen started projecting different scenes. It was similar to a test Katze went through to become Furniture, generic scenes of people, places and things, that slowly morphed into images that would generally elicit some sort of physical or emotional response. Scenes of war, famine, scenes of romance and kindness. Tragic scenes, erotic scenes, funny scenes.

“Anything?” Raoul asked after about twenty minutes.

“No. Nothing.”

“Very well, then, on to stage two.”

“What’s stage two,” Katze asked warily.

“You were under considerable stress when you had the episode before, therefore we need to find a way to increase your anxiety.”

“And exactly how do you plan to do that?”

“Well, I was going to hypnotize...”

“No.” If he was under hypnosis he might reveal secrets.

“Very well, then we have two options. You can take a serum that I have created to increase your heart rate and blood pressure to simulate anxiety, or...”

“Or?”

“You can strip and I can play with you until you have an episode.”

Katze rolled up his sleeve. “The shot.”

“Spoilsport,” Raoul returned, although he knew that was the option Katze would choose. Just as he was about to inject the needle into Katze’s skin he pulled away.

“There’s nothing in there that will make me tell the truth or anything is there?”

“Of course not, however it will be easier if you are completely honest with me about your feelings once we begin this.”

“You can’t ask me anything about Iason.”

“I am aware.”

“Or my work.”

“Agreed.”

“Or...Ow!” Katze rubbed his arm where Raoul had jabbed him with the needle and injected the serum. “That hurt!”

“You’re wasting time.” Raoul smiled and patted one of the exam tables.

“Lay down here”

“Can’t we do it in the chair?”

“No, because I need to strap you down.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m not sure how severely your anxiety will manifest itself, therefore it is better to secure you so that you don’t injure yourself.”

“Wait, what do you mean, you don’t know?” Katze demanded, as he was firmly manhandled onto to the table. He was unsure if his rising panic was

due to the new drug in his system or the idea of what kind of substance he'd just been injected with. "Haven't you tested it before?"

"I'm testing it now." Raoul gently, shoved Katze's head down to lay flat and the field strips immediately fell across Katze's wrists, waist and ankles, securing him to the table.

"I never agreed to that! I said I didn't want to be your fucking guinea pig, Raoul!"

"I'm a scientist," Raoul returned as he attached the vitals monitor to the side of Katze's neck. "I work in a lab, what did you think I would be doing with you?"

Mother fucking, cock sucking...Katze thought furiously as he struggled to get free, but then his anger slowly morphed into anxiety and fear. His heart started to pound, and it felt like it was going to break through his rib cage. He could hear and feel his pulse through every point of his body. His mouth dried up, his muscles tensed and his eyes started to roll back in his head.

"Oops, too much," Raoul decided mildly and prepared a small amount of sedative, just as Katze started to scream. "There, now. This will lessen the apprehension, you'll be fine." He carefully injected the sedative directly into Katze's neck so it would reach his blood stream faster, and approved when his vitals stabilized and the Human, who's screams turned to gasps, and then to a heavy panting.

"What...what..."

"I gave you too much, but you're fine now." Raoul pulled his work screen over by the table, and settled on a stool beside Katze. He took Katze's hand. "How do you feel?" he asked as he made notations on the screen. "Be honest."

"L...Like... what?" Pins and needles! All over his body were sharp, poking pins and needles!

"Are you hot, cold, average?"

“C... cold.”

Raoul touched a switch on the table and Katze started to feel the padding beneath him start to warm. “Better?”

“Y...yes.”

“You’re still lucid, so that’s good.” He projected a holo-screen above the bed. “Can you see that or is it too dark?”

“D... dark.” Katze was starting to warm up but he couldn’t stop shivering. “S...shaking. C...can’t stop.”

“Yes, that’s probably a side effect.”

“S...side...” Katze tried to concentrate, remember that that fucking Blondie had just tried an untested drug on him. “K... Kill me...”

“It won’t kill, you,” Raoul returned, his eyes monitoring Katze’s vitals closely, even as he added figures and formulas to his screen. “And if it does, I can bring you back.”

“F... Fuck...”

“Perhaps we’ll try that later.” He dimmed the lights in the lab, so that only the bright, empty screen above the bed was clearly visible, then he leaned in closely to Katze. “I will not let you die, Katze. Remember that you are safe here. No harm will come to you.”

“Harm...already...” Katze began and then squeezed his eyes shut. No, he had asked for Raoul’s help, so he needed to suck it up, he needed to trust the Blondie, no matter how hard that was. “O...okay.”

“I’ll begin then.”

Katze managed to nod and focused on the screen as Raoul started to speak and as he did, whatever word he used, a corresponding picture appeared on screen.

“Iason. Riki. Rape. Drink. Son. Knife. Green. Hello. Father. Pay. Market. Girl. Boy...” Raoul spotted the spike in Katze’s blood pressure almost instantly, but continued. “Sex. Furniture. Table. Goodbye. Men. Boy.” Another spike and then a whimper from the patient beside him. He turned, saw that Katze’s eyes were glued to the screen above him but his face had gone completely lax. “Katze?” No response. “Boy?”

Katze slowly turned his head and the desolation in those deep green eyes caused a flicker of discomfort inside Raoul, still the Blondie pushed forward. “What are you feeling?”

“It hurts,” the small voice coming from a man’s body said.

“Why does it hurt?”

“They don’t stop. It hurts.” Katze’s head slowly rolled back to look up at the screen. “I’m a bad boy. I have to be punished.”

“How are you punished?”

“Daddy punishes me. Daddy hurts me.” Again, Katze looked at him. “I don’t have a name.”

“You do have a name. Your name is Katze.”

“No. I’m no one. My mother left. She didn’t want me. Daddy hurts me. He doesn’t want me.” Katze blinked at Raoul. “Do you want me? I’ll be good. I can do it like he showed me. I’ll be good.”

Raoul touched Katze’s hair and watched the boy flinch. “You are good.”

“No. I’m bad. I’m rotten to the core.”

“Who told you that?”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

Katze turned away and Raoul tried to caress his hair, this time he didn't flinch.

"Why are you a bad boy, Katze?"

"I hate him," came the quiet sob. "I hate my father. I hate my mother. I hate them all."

"They hurt you, abandoned you. You have every right to hate them." Katze turned to look at him again and for a moment Raoul saw, what he thought, was a hint of the man he knew. "You are a good boy. I want you, Katze. You are a good boy, and I want you. You are Katze. You are important, and more importantly you are a man now. You are no longer that helpless little boy."

"You just want to fuck me, like he does."

"No." Well, Raoul paused as the idea suddenly appealed to him. Maybe. No. No, absolutely not, he decided. He may flirt with the idea and make such suggestions to harass Katze, but he was not Jason Mink. He did not fornicate with Humans. "No, I want to help you."

Katze continued to stare at him, pain, sorrow, anger, and then...just in a split single moment, confusion.

"R...Raoul?"

"Yes."

Katze's eyes rolled up to the hand that was caressing his hair. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping you calm. You regressed. How do you feel?"

He'd regressed? How? He'd felt nothing except the panic from the drug and then a rush of fear and then...Then, nothing. He couldn't remember a single damn thing! "What did I say?"

"Shall I tell you, or would you like to hear it for yourself?"

“You recorded it?” Katze started to sit up, then remembered that he was still strapped down, and as that memory crashed down on him, so too did the remains of the drug in his system and he started to shake again. “Fuck. Fuck, I’m going again. I don’t want this, I don’t want it, Raoul. Make it stop!”

Raoul reached for a sedative and Katze panicked more. “Don’t put me out! God damn it don’t put out!”

“It won’t knock you out completely,” Raoul assured, even as he neatly applied the needle. “It will simply reduce the effects of the drug in your system.”

“Don’t put me out!” What the hell was he so afraid of, Katze wondered, even as he felt his heart rate decrease and the incredible tension in his limbs start to ease. “Can’t sleep. I don’t want to sleep,” he murmured and Raoul glanced away from the screen displaying his vitals to study the Human’s pale face.

“Why don’t you want to sleep?”

“Dreams. Horrible dreams.”

“Do you remember them?”

“No, never, just that they’re bad.” Katze started to shiver again and Raoul rose to get a blanket and toss over him. “Let me go. Can you let me go?” Raoul released his restraints and immediately Katze sat up, clutching the blanket to his shivering body. “Fuck it’s cold!”

Raoul found another blanket and wrapped it around Katze’s shoulders. “I’ll note that side effect for the future.”

Katze glared at him. “If you ever give me that shit again I’ll peel you like a fucking grape and sell your innards for scrap!”

Raoul chuckled, well at least Katze’s threats were inventive. He touched his screen and the hologram that had been above Katze moved to the front of

him. “Would you like a tea?”

“Got any coffee?”

“Yes, I do.” Raoul made himself busy preparing two cups of coffee, added a splash of brandy to both.

“What did it?” Katze asked, calmer now, but also horrifically sleepy, which was why he had asked for coffee. “What made me snap?”

“You didn’t snap,” Raoul assured as he again settled on the stool in front of his computer screen. “You just grew very still and quiet. If I had not been looking for a change I might not have even seen it.”

“Great, just what I need.” Katze took several sips of coffee before continuing. He could still feel the heat from the table beneath his ass and legs, so that was helping. “So, what was it? What made me change?”

“You didn’t change, you regressed, and I believe it was the word boy.” Raoul turned a sharp eye to Katze immediately after voicing the word, and he watched the man grow very, chillingly still again. “Katze?”

“Boy,” he murmured. “That’s what he always called me. Boy.”

“Your mother never gave you a proper name?”

He shook his head. “If she did I don’t remember it and he never called me by it.” He took another long drink of his coffee, stared down into the dark liquid. “I’ve heard the word before, I’m sure of it. It’s a common word so why didn’t it affect me before?”

“I can only conclude that, as I suggested, when you are highly stressed or agitated it triggers you in a way that it can’t when you are fully in control of yourself.” He put his hand on Katze’s shoulder. “I do wish you would let me call my colleague...”

“No!” Raoul shook his head. He wasn’t exactly thrilled with Raoul’s treatment so far, but he couldn’t share this with anyone else. He simply

couldn't risk it. Despite what he said, he had no choice but to trust the Blondie and hope it didn't backfire on him. "Just you. I just want you."

"Oh, how I have longed to hear those words."

Katze's head snapped up, his eyes narrowed. "Say what?"

"Just kidding," Raoul assured, although hearing the words had given him a slight thrill that he couldn't explain. "Would you like to see the recording?"

"Not really, but I'd better anyway."

Katze watched in complete silence, and when it was over, he lowered his eyes away from Raoul. "I don't get it. I've moved beyond all that, well beyond. I haven't even thought about my father in years, so why now is it suddenly affecting me?"

"As I said, stress can manifest itself in Humans in a variety of ways. Even someone as adept to dealing with all manner of situations, such as yourself, can be prone to extreme stress and the resulting factors it may cause."

"So, how do I stop it?"

"Well, I could suggest medication, but you would not take it."

"No." Medication could slow his thought process and physical reaction time. He had to be alert at all times. "Anything else come to mind?"

"There are other ways of relieving stress, of course, though I do not believe you would agree to those either."

"If you mean, sex, then no. I don't agree."

"Then we are at an impasse."

"Great."

Raoul clapped him on the shoulder. "Fear not, I will continue to study the matter, and you. I am sure there is a solution."

Katze stared down into his coffee cup, so, more tests with Raoul. Fucking Fantastic.

Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Cal gets an unexpected and upsetting call

Cal set the last of the clean laundry in his basket and picked it up just as the main house link sounded. He stepped out of the laundry area, through the kitchen and dining room and up the three steps to Iason's office, which held the main terminal.

"Open communication. You have reached Iason..." he began and felt the laundry basket slip from his grasp.

"How does it feel, Cal?" Bean asked him from the other side of the screen.
"To finally have what you wanted?"

"What I...you...I..." Cal stumbled back and would have fallen to the ground if the desk chair had not been there to catch him.

"How does it feel to sleep in my bed, prepare the food I should be preparing? How do you sleep at night knowing what you did to me?"

"What I did? Bean, I...you...what you did to me was...was..." Horrific!
Inexcusable! Terrifying! Insane!

"Oh that," Bean tossed, easily. "That was nothing compared to what I'm *going* to do. You'll think that was a vacation when I start the real punishment."

Cal started to shake. "Why?" he cried. "I did nothing to you! Nothing!"

"You stole my Master from me! My position in Iason Mink's house!"
Bean's face moved closer to the screen and sneered. "Are you still fucking
The Pet?"

“I...I never! Riki and I are...we...”

“It doesn’t matter, because I’ve learned all kinds of interesting ways to make you suffer and this time, when I’m finished with you, not even your precious Riki will want to look at you. This time, there’ll be nothing left for them to see but a dirty, pathetic, plastic whore.”

“I...I’m not...dirty. I wasn’t....”

“You liked it, didn’t you? When those men were screwing you? Did you imagine one of them was Riki? Did you pretend that you had a hard on, Cal?”

“No. No.” Cal put his hands to his ears, horrified. “Shut up! Shut up! End communication!”

The screen went blank yet Cal continued to stare at it for several long seconds afterwards. Then he spun around, worried that his cries might have woken the house, but everything was quiet; everything was still.

On unsteady legs he rose, and with trembling hands he slowly gathered the laundry that had fallen to the floor; he refolded each piece with deliberate precision and set it back in the basket. Slowly, he rose and gripped the basket with both hands, before he stepped out of the office and walked across the living area to climb the stairs. On the second floor, he opened the door that led to the linen closet and stepped inside.

“Took you long enough,” Bean said as the three men with him suddenly lurched forward, tearing at Cal’s hair, his clothes, his flesh...

“Cal! Cal, wake up!”

Cal’s eyes flew open in mid-struggle and stared into the dark familiar eyes of the man holding him. He pushed away, rolled off the bed and huddled in a corner. “Don’t look at me! Don’t touch me!” He tried to pull his clothes tighter around him, still thinking they were ripped and shredded as they had been in the dream. *Dirty. Filthy. Useless. Whore.*

Riki slid off the bed and crouched beside the trembling boy. “It’s okay,” he said quietly. “It was a nightmare. Whatever you were dreaming wasn’t real, it’s okay.”

“Get away! Don’t touch me!”

“I have bad dreams too. Remember you helped me through some of them? Let me help...”

Cal turned his face to the wall, appalled, ashamed and afraid. “Go away. Please, please go away,” he whispered.

“Cal.”

Cal visibly stiffened, but didn’t turn away from the wall, if anything he seemed to curl tighter into it.

“Are you an animal?” Iason stepped into the room. “Get off the floor immediately.”

“Iason!” Riki snapped, angrily, but then watched, astounded as Cal, after a moment’s hesitation, uncurled and used the wall to climb back to his feet. With shaking hands, he turned and straightened his shirt. Tears streamed down his face, but his expression was slowly turning blank.

“Fetch me a brandy.”

“Yes, sir,” came Cal’s hollow reply and he jerkily stepped forward. Stopped, as if he had forgotten where he was going, then moved forward again. Iason stepped out of the boy’s way as he moved through the door of his room.

“What the fu...” Riki began and found his mouth covered by a large hand.

“Be quiet,” Iason growled as they followed Cal to the kitchen and out to the dining area where the liquor cabinet was stored. Cal retrieved a glass from the display beside the cabinet, keyed in the lock release code and pulled out a bottle of brandy. He filled the glass half full, turned and offered it to Iason, who passed his hand over it.

“Drink it,” Iason ordered. Cal’s eyes lifted to the Blondie’s, widened in confusion. “Do as I say.”

Cal took a cautious sip, but his hand was shaking so badly that the glass was hitting against his teeth. He used both hands but it didn’t help, and when Iason’s fingers closed over both of Cal’s to steady the glass the young Furniture’s heart thudded even harder in his chest. Iason’s hand was bare! He had never had direct skin contact with an Elite!

“Finish it,” Iason said, his voice gentler now and watched as Cal complied. “Now, go back to bed.”

Cal stared down at the empty glass, slightly ill from the liquid that had burned a path all the way from his throat to his stomach, and had the brief thought that he should wash the glass first, then lock up the cabinet and... something else. What else was there? He started to shake again, then stopped almost immediately as his eyes started to droop. He lifted his gaze to Iason, this time in confusion.

Iason took the glass, handed it to Riki and scooped up the young boy as Cal’s legs crumpled. He carried Cal back to his room and laid him on the bed, slightly surprised when Riki quickly covered the young man and then started to lie down beside him.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want him to be alone if he has another nightmare.”

“Riki, you cannot sleep here with him.”

“Iason, he needs someone with him. He...”

“You belong in our bed.”

“Just for tonight! Just in case...”

“Riki!” Iason willed himself to calm down.

When he had entered the room, witnessed the state that Cal was in, he knew that the young man was filled with fear and with shame. Raoul had warned

him when he brought Cal back to the condo that the young Furniture might still have episodes of trauma and if so, to be gentle, yet firm with him. Cal was trained to respond to orders, and Raoul found that a firm voice and direct command worked better than coddling the boy.

He was only moments behind Riki when his lover had shot out of their bed at the horrible sounds of Cal's screams. He had allowed Riki to approach the boy first, knowing there was a kind of bond between them, but he quickly ascertained that the reality of Riki seeing Cal in such a state brought more shame to Cal, and caused the boy's anxiety to worsen. That was why he given Cal an order, because it would cut through the fear of Cal's nightmare to his core training, just as Raoul had advised.

Once he had Cal's attention, Iason had nipped a sedative out of the kitchen as they followed Cal through the condo and easily dumped it into the glass when Cal offered it to him. Sleep was the only thing that would help Cal now, a quiet, dreamless sleep and then waking up without the embarrassment of having other people see him unsettled.

He stepped forward and yanked Riki off the bed. "Come."

Riki snatched his hand away. "No! He needs someone, Iason! I had you when I had my nightmares. You helped me, so maybe I can help..."

Iason cupped Riki's face, bent and kissed him thoroughly before lifting his head again. "You and Cal are two very different creatures, Riki. It would horrify and embarrass him to wake and find you in his bed, regardless of the reason. I know you care deeply for him, I accept that, but Cal is still, at his core, Furniture, and you must try to remember that the comfort you receive, he cannot. Even with your stubborn pride you sometimes have trouble accepting the comfort I offer you, yet you would you deny Cal his own sense of pride?"

"No, but..." Riki looked at the bed. "He needs someone to help him through this."

“He is very resourceful. I have no doubt he will find what he needs elsewhere.”

“Don’t you care about him at all?”

“Of course I do! This is why I say such things. Please, let us go to bed so we can all get some rest. I promise you that this is the best thing for him.”

Glaring at him, Riki stormed out of the room. In his heart, he knew that Iason was right, but he hated that he had to leave Cal all alone after such a thing. He’d spent most of his life alone, and until Iason there had been no one to hold him when he woke from a nightmare, or mess him up so much he didn’t have the energy to dream. He just wanted to help Cal, who had done so damn much for him. He owed him, owed him big and Iason never seemed to allow him to repay that debt.

“Do not sulk,” Iason warned as they entered their bedroom and he pulled off his robe. He slid, naked, between the sheets of the massive bed. “Come, I will take your mind off of Cal.”

“I don’t need a distraction!” Riki growled as he ripped off the jeans he had thrown on and sat on the bed instead of under the sheets. “I’m upset, do you get that? Sex is not the answer for when you’re upset!”

Iason rolled onto his side and reached to touch Riki’s arm. “What is the answer? Tell me and I will do that for you.”

“I want to do something for Cal. I owe him.”

“Cal does not want you to owe him, Riki.”

“That doesn’t change anything.”

Iason studied the sulking mongrel turned prince and wondered if it would completely destroy the current phase of their relationship if he simply tied Riki to the bed and did as he wanted, and if Riki would just accept his punishment and get over it in a couple of days? It was a risk, Riki’s temper was legendary and he was quite good at holding a grudge between them.

Would it be worth it? Possibly, because he was also frustrated and taking it out on Riki would go a long way to comforting him, but he supposed it would not be the appropriate response for a mate to do. Human relationships were exceedingly difficult to maneuver through and he was having second thoughts about Jupiter revoking Riki's pet status.

In an unusual sign of exasperation, Iason flopped onto his back and stared upward. "What *must* I do?" He couldn't believe he was even asking this! He was a Blondie of Tanagura, how had he managed to lower himself to the point where his actions were being controlled by a mongrel? "What will satisfy your anger this time?"

"You won't let me stay with Cal?"

"No. I am firm on that."

"Then, can I try something else?"

"What else?"

Riki shrugged and picked at the sheets. "I don't know yet, I'll have to think about it. But if I do come up with something, do you promise to let me do it?"

Promise this, promise that, Iason was going to start charging credits for all the promises he was forced to make. His word should be enough, if he said something that was the end of the matter. What was the point of all these vows and promises? "If it is within reason," he conceded and put his palms to his eyes, which were surprisingly tired. "May we now go back to sleep?"

Riki slid between the sheets and after a moment's hesitation he moved closer and rested his head on Iason's chest. "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"Yes." And yet Iason's arms slid around Riki out of habit.

"Well, I'm mad at you too."

"Well, there you are." Iason closed his eyes when Riki didn't respond and started to shut down, but then Riki spoke, in a whisper quiet voice.

“Don’t be mad.”

Iason opened his eyes and rolled so that Riki was on his back and Iason was looking down at him. “Then perhaps you should do something to cheer me up.”

Riki reached for the tendrils of soft, silky, golden hair that fell like a curtain towards him. “I might be able to think of something.”

“Oh?” Iason lifted an eyebrow as Riki played with his hair with one hand, while the other hand slid between them and gripped Iason’s hardening arousal. “Careful not to start something you can’t finish, my love. I am feeling extremely unsatisfied.”

Riki smirked and then slowly started to slide his body down in the bed. When his mouth closed over Iason he felt the Blondie adjust so that he was straddling Riki’s chest and allowing the mongrel better access. The position was very similar to one he had tried on Riki a few months ago and he had to admit, it added a decadent thrill to the sensation of Riki sucking him. His blue eyes remained glued to the mongrel’s face as he thought it would be a very long night for both of them.

Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason is determined to help Carrie trust again, in the only way he knows how.

“Carrie.”

Carrie glanced over from where she had just finished making a sale and smiled in surprise at the tall, Blondie standing at the edge of her stall. “Iason! Hi, two minutes.” She held up her fingers as another customer immediately demanded her attention.

Iason smirked, realizing that only Carrie had the gall to tell him, a Blondie, to wait.

“Yes, sir, what are you interested in?”

“I like that necklace,” the man stated. “I’ll give you twenty for it.”

“The price is one sixty, sir.”

“That’s too much. Give it to me for twenty.”

“I can give you a ten percent discount, if you wish to purchase an additional...”

“Twenty is all it’s worth!”

Carrie, undeterred by the customer’s abrasive tactics simply smiled. “Actually, Sir, the stones are specially mined at Almeda Colony in the Delta System, so they have a specific value on their own. If you like, you can take the necklace, after purchase, to any jeweler and have it appraised. They will tell you that one sixty is a considerable deal for the quality you are getting.”

“They’re all liars, just like you people.” The annoying man grabbed the necklace and started to shove it into his pocket. “I’ll only pay twenty, so

just take my credits and...”

A white gloved hand, snatched the necklace away from the customer.

“I will purchase it for four hundred,” Iason stated as he glowered down at the obnoxious Human. “Five hundred if you sell me this one as well, he will make an excellent meal for the Eclipse.”

The customer blustered. “W...what? You...you can’t...”

“I don’t know. Do you think your oven will be big enough?” Carrie asked Iason, ignoring the other man.

“Cal will see to the preparation, he has many dishes planned for the event already.”

“I can’t wait to taste some of them.” She glanced at the rude man on the other side of her stall, then leaned towards Iason and in a loud stage whisper said. “I don’t think this guy’s worth an extra hundred though.”

“Now just a minute!”

“How much would you recommend?” Iason asked, copying both her stance and whisper, enjoying the game immensely.

“Twenty.” Carrie smiled at Iason again, then narrowed her eyes at the customer. “He’s definitely not worth more than twenty.”

“How dare...”

“Done.” Iason handed her his credit stick and snapped his fingers. Almost instantly two Tanguara security guards appeared behind the fat man. “Bring this purchase home and have my furniture prepare...” Iason looked at Carrie again. “Cooked, do you think, or raw?”

“Oh, I think cooked, definitely to burn off some of that fat. Nothing worse than trying to eat a nice piece of meat and get caught up in the gristle.”

“You can’t do this!” the man blustered even as he was grabbed on either side. “I’m not a product you can buy! I’m a man and a very important importer in this sector...”

“Maybe,” Carrie agreed. “But he’s a Blondie of Tanagura, and what he wants, he gets.”

The man went a very light shade of gray as he was carted off. Carrie waited until they were out of site before she started howling with laughter.

“Oh my God, did you see his face?” Her hand went to her stomach as she bent over in a fit of giggles, uncaring that everyone in the marketplace was staring at her. “That made my day. Absolutely made my day. Oh, oh, God.” She wiped tears from her eyes and offered him the credit stick.

“You haven’t rung up my purchase.”

“The necklace is only one sixty.”

“Plus twenty.” Iason reminded and watched Carrie slowly sober.

“That was a joke,” she said cautiously as a cramp formed in her stomach. Iason wouldn’t really feed that guy to them during the Eclipse, would he? “Wasn’t it?”

“Have you ever known me to tell a joke?”

Carrie paled. “You... You can’t... You’re not really going to...?” Her voice dropped to a whisper again, a quite one this time. “Are Blondies c... cannibals?”

“Technically it would not be cannibalism as he is a Human and I am an Elite.” When she lost all remaining colour in her face, Iason placed a gloved hand over her fidgeting one. “And no. All that fat would give us food poisoning.”

“Um...then, what exactly are you going to do to him?”

“He will be taught some manners and then removed from the city until he is better able to conduct himself.”

Carrie suddenly didn’t want to know any more, and she tried not to think of how she had just helped perpetuate another person’s pain and humiliation. “I never meant for you to actually hurt him, Iason.”

“I will not lay a hand on him.” He pointed to his credit stick. “My purchase is four hundred and twenty, please conclude it.”

“Iason, I didn’t actually sell you that guy!” She can’t have done, she thought, horrified.

“The amount is to make up for lost sales. I need you to close down for the rest of the day and come with me.” He gently took the stick from her and rang it through her machine, then slipped it and the necklace into his pocket.

“So, you’re buying me too?”

He could see that the encounter had upset her and, was that disappointment on her face? While he had not been serious about making the man a meal, he was speaking truthfully about his purchase of the arrogant and rude Human. He had intended to have the man beaten, and then shipped to his mining colony on Alpha Omega 7; a few years there would work off the fat and re-educate the man of how truly insignificant he was. However, he could see that Carrie was too tender-hearted for that reality and he found he did not like the idea that she was disappointed in him for any reason. Why, he could not fathom, but it did not set well with him.

He reached across the stall’s counter, plucked her cloak from the stool and held it out for her as she shut down her display and stepped out. “I will have him escorted out of Tanagura only, if that is your wish.”

She glanced up at him as he placed the cloak around her shoulders. Iason was *the Blondie* of Tanagura, and it wasn’t like she didn’t understand what a horrible place this could be or how powerful and unforgiving the Elite’s were. She saw the injustice and harshness of the dystopian society daily, but

she had always managed to stay apart from it. This time, she was in it up to her neck. “I know you have the right to do whatever you want, Iason. I’m not debating that or...or judging it, only...”

He squeezed her shoulders briefly before releasing her, this would be a difficult day for her, so he would not add to her misery. “Don’t trouble yourself over it. I will see to it, now come with me.”

Setting her field screen around the booth to prevent theft and vandalism, she quietly followed him to his car. She slid into the passenger side as Iason settled behind the wheel.

“Where are we going?” she asked as they started driving.

“You will know when we arrive.” Iason merged onto the main highway that led outside of the city and attempted to put her at ease. “Will you be joining us for the Eclipse?”

Appreciating a change in topic, Carrie nodded. “If you’re sure it’s okay?”

“Of course. We would not have invited you otherwise.”

“Do you need me to bring anything?”

“I believe we have everything that will be required.” He glanced at her and attempted to lighten the mood. “But we’ll now have to make do without the center pierce pig with an apple in his mouth.”

She smiled a little at his joke. “Whose idea was the party? Riki’s?”

“Mine.” He smiled at her look. “I actually do like to socialize.”

She grinned. “I see.” She clasped her hands together in her lap. “So, where are we going?”

“To see an old acquaintance of yours.”

“Mine?” She scowled and a start of panic flickered inside her heart. “Someone I know?”

“You are protected, Carrie. No one will ever hunt you again, this is my promise.”

Touched by his vow, Carrie still shook her head. “You can’t promise that, Iason.” She turned to the window. “No matter who this is, they’ll tell someone about me and word will get out.” She sighed. “I’ll have to leave again.”

“You will go nowhere without my permission!”

Her head snapped sideways to stare at him in surprise.

Iason realized his mistake and quickly added to his statement. “We are your Pride, are we not? Riki and I? Therefore, logically you also belong to us. I will not allow your life to be disrupted again, or you to be hurt again. Anyone entering our planet’s atmosphere who has any designs on your person will be immediately dispensed with. This is a promise I can keep because *I am* Iason Mink.” He turned to meet her shocked gaze. “Do you challenge my authority?”

She shook her head, slowly.

“Do you doubt my conviction then, to keep you from harm?”

Again, she shook her head.

“Then know that you are safe here and always will be. What we do today will be painful for you, but once it is done you can start your life anew, under my protection and free from worry.”

“Iason, I...” Carrie was very aware that next to Jupiter, Iason Mink was probably the most powerful being in this sector, in several sectors, but it wasn’t his job to take care of her. She wasn’t one of his pets. “I’m not your responsibility.”

“You are wrong.”

“No, no Iason, I’m not. I understand it may be difficult for you to comprehend, but you really can’t just have whatever you want. You can’t

buy people or use people or keep people under your rule just because you feel like it.”

“Once again you are mistaken, I can do all of that and more. However,” Iason added as she started to protest. “This is a different cause all together. I am not doing this because I think of you as a pet or object, Carrie. I think of you as a kind, resourceful, strong being who has had a tragic and brutal life. I have never been one to consider the lives of others, unless it directly affects me or what I desire, but you are different. You have been of great help to me and mine. You have sacrificed for me, have been loyal to me.

Therefore, I do wish you to have a good and proper life. I do not wish you to be afraid to come to dinner at my house, or to be guarded with me.”

“Iason. I’m not...”

“You are, Carrie. You said it yourself, you do not trust easily. In that we are alike, for I do not easily give my trust to anyone.” He glanced at her again. “I have very few exceptions to that hard and firm rule, and you are one of those exceptions. I wish to be the exception for you as well, and to accomplish this I will do whatever must be done so that you can feel safe and secure, here on Amoï.”

Carrie lowered her eyes then turned away to stare out the window, afraid that her tears might offend him in some way and yet unable to keep them from spilling over. Never in her life had she had someone try so hard to help her, to make her a part of their life. Never in her life had she had such unwavering support.

Iason heard the small, short sniff, scowled. He pulled over to the side of the road, then handed her a handkerchief from his pocket. “I should not have raised my voice, for that I will apologize, but I am right about this. You may be angry with me now, but you will overcome it. You will learn to trust me. Carrie, and I *will* keep you safe.”

“Because it’s how you wish it to be?” she asked quietly, reaching for the handkerchief.

“Of course. I will accept your ire, I have become accustomed to such things with Riki, however I have considered all possible scenarios and this is the most logical. Once you see what...”

“No.” Carrie wiped her face, then turned to look at him. “I’m not upset with you, Iason.”

“Then why are you crying?”

She sniffed again, shrugged. “I guess...I guess because I’ve never had anyone fight for me before. Never had anyone in my corner, before.”

“Were you not in my corner when you tried to save Riki and I? Were you not in Riki’s corner when you tried to defend him to those guards, and even from me? How can we not be in your corner, Carrie, with all that you have given us?”

“Well, shit. I’m sorry, Iason.”

“Why are you appolo...” Iason’s words were cut off in a moment of blind shock as Carrie threw herself into his arms and squeezed him, hard. “Why are we embracing? Is this a battle tactic for your species I am unaware of?”

“Just shut up and hold me, okay?”

“Will it put an end to your tears?”

“Yes.”

“Very well then.” Iason shifted and slid his arms around her, it wasn’t at all uncomfortable, in fact it was rather nice, even if they were twisted sideways in the seats. “Is this how you usually end arguments?”

“Sometimes,” she muttered and gave in to the urge to curl a few strands of his silken hair around her finger tips. “I really like your hair.”

“Thank you.” Iason searched for something polite to say. “I really like your ass.”

She shot back in her seat and barked with laughter. “Iason!”

“It was the only think in my viewpoint,” he reasoned. “And it is a very nice ass, for a woman.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Riki’s is better.”

“On that we agree.”

Iason scowled at her. “You should not be looking at his ass.”

“You shouldn’t be looking at my ass.”

Iason opened his mouth to argue, realized that she had a point, and pulled back onto the road again. “We are getting off topic.”

Carrie nodded, wiped away the remainder of her tears. “Which was, where the hell are we going?”

Iason pulled off the highway a moment later, then turned left onto a smaller road that lead further into the desert. After about another mile he came to a stop outside of a decrepit, old factory. “We are here.”

“Where’s here?” she demanded as she stepped out of the car.

“Come with me.” Iason walked around to catch her arm and pulled her towards the door.

“You’re not selling me to someone on the black market, are you?”

He paused, looked down at her and consider the fortune he could make, considering she was the last of her kind. “Do you really believe I would do that?”

“I can see credit signs in your eyes, Iason.”

“Calculating the worth of something is second nature to me,” he rebuffed as they started walking again. “That does not mean I would be willing to part with it.”

“So, you’re not going to sell me?”

“No. Not. You are perfectly safe, as I have already explained.”

They entered the door, turned left, right and then headed down some stairs. At the end of the stairs, a soft glow pierced the dim light and she saw a figure standing at the end of the stairs outside a large, heavy steel door. As the person inhaled, a glow fell over his face and Katze stepped towards them.

“Curioser, and curioser,” she murmured.

“You will wait here for a moment.” Iason said, and without waiting for her reply entered through the door.

Carrie shifted her feet nervously and caught Katze’s arm before he could follow Iason. “C...can I have one of those?”

“Nervous?” he asked, kindly and she nodded. He handed her his cigarette. “Take the rest.”

“Thanks.” She grabbed it, inhaled far too quickly and immediately started coughing.

“Try not to asphyxiate yourself before we get back,” he said and then disappeared through the door and secured it behind him.

The room was lit by a reddish glow, but Katze ordered full lights as they stepped inside. The man bound to a chair in the center of the room winced at the sudden brightness. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead from the unbearable heat of the room, and the veins on his neck stood out from struggling against his bonds.

“Who the hell are you? Why am I here?” he demanded. “You have no right to do this!”

“My name is Iason Mink.” Iason turned and settled into the high back chair that Katze held out for him. “You are here because I requested it and you have no rights here.”

“Look, who are you people? If this is about the money I owe, I’ll pay it back, I swear! I just need a little more time and...”

“Is that what you do? You run up an impossible gambling debt and then leave others to pay for it?”

“What? No! No, I’ll pay it, I always pay it. Rinchi, he knows I’ll make good on it. We just had a lull in traffic this month and so I...”

“Have you ever had a life altering experience?”

“Huh?”

“I did, once, when I came upon a mongrel being attacked by several men. I had a flicker of annoyance at the odds, and so I stopped the fight.” Iason crossed one long leg over the other. “In that instant, my life changed forever.”

“Uh...okay. That’s great...I guess, but listen if you can just let me go I can get you half the money right now...”

“You, Mr. Debaur are also about to have a life altering experience, although I suspect you will not enjoy it as much as I did.”

“What are you...” the man began and then Katze opened the door and Carrie walked into the room. Lane Debaur swiftly lost all colour in his face, but then he recovered, or attempted to. “Suzanne!”

“L...Lane?” Carrie looked at her ex fiancé and then back to Iason. “I don’t understand. What is he doing here?”

“He is here to pay for his crime and so you may clear up any unfinished business.”

Carrie stared at him, dumbfounded, then turned back to the man she once loved and felt fear crawl through her.

“B...baby, where have you been?” Lane cooed. “Your parents were so worried about you and...”

“Stop it, Lane,” Carrie ordered in a brittle voice. “I know what you did.”

“Did? What are you talking about? I’ve been looking for you all this time! Why didn’t you contact me?”

“Contact you? How could I contact you Lane? The men you sold me to, to pay your debt, kept me chained in a cage. They hurt me. In ways I never believed I could be hurt, but you...you betrayed me!”

The pain of those memories flooded over her, the agony of what those men had done to her, the men *he* had sold her to. And then, even when she escaped, her family refused to see her, her life had been destroyed, shattered and mangled beyond all recognition. All because of this one man who she was foolish enough to fall in love with.

She could feel the change come upon her, the lengthening of her teeth, the scratchy, prickly sensation at the sudden accelerated growth of hair around her face and up her arms and legs. She hadn’t thought about this man for years, but now, here he was sitting before her and all she wanted was to gut him. She wanted to sink her teeth into his jugular and tear his throat out while he screamed for mercy. She wanted to rip his black heart out of his chest with her own claws and force it down his shattered throat.

When a hand descended upon her shoulder she snarled up at Iason, who had risen from the chair and now stood beside her.

“He is yours to do with what you will,” Iason stated quietly, and watched the man in the chair shiver violently at the Blondie and transforming woman before him. “No one will deny your right for revenge.”

Carrie’s breathing had quickened, she was practically panting, and salivating at the thought of tearing into Lane, and yet, as Iason’s cold blue

eyes held hers, she knew she would not, could not kill. No, not cold, she decided, kind, comforting were the eyes of Iason Mink. She would kill to protect him, to protect Riki, and even to protect herself, but no. She would not kill Lane DeBaur. She was not the animal those men had tried to make her into. Neither they nor Lane would have that power over her. Her Human side won the battle and her Dakfure side receded, slowly, almost painfully for the urge to kill was very strong. And then, for the second time that day, she found herself in the arms of a Blondie.

Iason caressed Carrie's hair until she stopped trembling. He knew she was not a cold-blooded killer, unlike himself, who gave no thought to the lives of others. "You must face him," he whispered and she nodded, turning to face the man that had destroyed her trust.

"Suzanne, look, I get that you're angry, but I really..."

"Shut up."

"Baby, I still love you, I..."

"Shut up!" she screamed at him, and then seemed to physically rein in her temper. She could still feel Iason's hand on her shoulder and it offered her strength. "You robbed me of a good life, Lane. A happy, normal life, but... I..."

She took a breath as her hands fisted at her side and forced herself to look directly into his plain brown eyes. Plain, ordinary, she realized as she studied him, not the rich darkness of opals or the cold blue of ice, just ordinary, unimaginative brown. This man...How had she fallen in love with such a plain, pathetic man as this? She thought of Riki and Iason, of Katze and all the people she had met over the years that were so much more extraordinary than Lane DeBaur and she felt a sudden lightness in her chest. He was nothing, he really was absolutely worthless and what a mistake she would have made in marrying him.

"I will forget because you are not worth remembering," she continued. "I will forget because you don't deserve to have that much power over me anymore, and I will..." Her eyes willed up again but she viciously pushed

them away as her hand reached up to touch Iason's. "Trust again, and love again and be free again. I will live a better life than the one you stole from me, and I want you to know that, Lane. I want you to know that what you did, or why you did it doesn't matter anymore, because you have nothing and I..." She thought of her Pride, of Riki, Iason, sweet young Cal and even her fellow merchants. "I have everything. I will never give you another solitary thought after this, I am done with you, but you will think about me, Lane. You'll think about me every moment until it's your last, because you know what you did and you know you have to pay for it."

Lane stared at her, eyes wide as Carrie turned back into Iason, who kissed the top of her head and then gently passed her to Katze. "Take her up."

Katze nodded, slid his arm around Carrie's shoulder and walked her out of the room. Slowly they climbed the stairs, then headed through the passages of the factory until they were back out in the hot, unforgiving sun of Amoï.

Carrie broke away from him almost immediately and started to run, shedding her clothes as she went. Katze started to give chase, but by the time he'd reached her shoes, the first thing she had kicked off, she was already in full cat form and streaking across the desert. A cry sounded on the air, one filled with torment and pain, then turned into a howl of courage and redemption.

"There's a good girl," Katze murmured as he followed her path and retrieved her clothes. "Get it out of your system, I'll be here when you're done."

Back inside the factory, Iason studied his captive. "Well, that was illuminating."

"Uh...yeah, look, I don't know what lies she's been telling you..."

"Lies? The only liar here is you, Mr. Debaur."

"It wasn't like whatever she said. I mean, look, I didn't know what they were gonna do and I owed them a lot of money. I really had no choice and..."

“Now, you are in debt once again and...what a shame. You have no one to sell to make your payment.”

“Look, this has nothing to do with you. Suzanne looked fine and healthy. Like she said, she’s got a new life here and she forgives me so.....”

“Forgives you? Is that what you believed she was saying? She said she was done with you, that is totally different. I, however, am not done with you.” Jason walked over, towered over him and then crouched down. “Have you ever heard the human saying, hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil?”

Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki is called to Jupiter's tower and Guy decides to explore his new world on his own

Riki scowled as an alert came up on his personal comp screen and he clicked on it. His scowl turned into a grin, and then a mile-wide smile as he continued to read the crime alert that had been issued, Two suspects had broken through security at a the Del Rayn Casino and had gotten away with over two hundred thousand in credits. No detailed descriptions were offered as the security cameras had been jammed. Authorities believe it was the work of a four or five men, possibly working at the casino.

“Good job,” Riki said, chuckling at how wrong the description was.

He knew exactly who had broken in and how, and it was sheer brilliance to do it the day before the Eclipse because security would be tighter once the Eclipse hit. The main wall console beeped and Cal appeared and walked across the room to answer it while Riki continued to scan other reports of the robbery. The theft was noticed early this afternoon, which meant it happened very early in the morning. Night time would have been too risky as they added extra patrols. His plan had been to do it an hour before the guards changed shift, which was just after sunrise. Still, it was high risk, even then. If one thing went wrong they’d have been fucked. He was so damn proud of them. Hoping his guys were well away by now, he mentally wished them luck wherever they ended up.

“Riki.”

He turned as Cal approached with a small data chip in his hands that had been delivered through the mail slot on the console. “What is it?”

“A summons from Jupiter.”

Riki slowly sat up and set his tablet aside. “Why’s She sending for me like this?” he wondered aloud, because usually Iason was the one to deliver any requests from Jupiter.

“Should I contact Master Iason and confirm he is aware of it?”

“Yeah just...” Riki winced as a voice sounded in his head.

There is no need. Come to me, Riki.

Riki rubbed his head. “Actually, I think it’s legit.”

Cal scowled as Riki rose and took the chip from him. “Perhaps I should still contact...?”

“No, I’ll tell him later.” Riki shrugged into his jacket and headed for the door.

He had to leave the condo and take two portals to get to the main hub of Eos and then show his chip before entering the portal that would take him to Jupiter’s tower. He was shown into the main hologram room that he had been in a few times before.

“I’m here, what do you want?”

Almost immediately the stark white walls morphed into a lakeside cottage, complete with a rippling brook, singing birds and a wall of trees. The cottage door opened and from it a young woman with dark hair and eyes stepped out. She wore a simple jumpsuit of white and violet, she waved to him as he approached.

“Welcome home,” she said with a smile. Her voice sounded normal and didn’t echo off the walls or in his head as it usually did.

Riki paused. “Jupiter?”

“Yes.” The woman spun around and released what could only be described as a tinny laugh, filled with no emotion whatsoever. “What do you think? Am I suitable?”

“For what?”

“As a Human.”

“Uh...but you’re not Human.” Riki started to get a weird feeling in the pit of his stomach when She scowled, but a moment later Her smile returned. “So...why did you call me here?”

“I have not seen you properly since you returned.” She waved him forward and settled at a small garden table with two chairs. “Are you fully recovered from your ordeal? I left you alone, as you asked, was that not good of me?”

“Sure, okay.” When Jupiter waved at the opposite chair a second time he slowly sat. “I’m okay, I mean I’m fine.”

“Are you pleased with your new position?”

“It’s okay.” He couldn’t exactly say he was pleased as it was still too new and there were some tensions around him, more so it seemed than there had been before. “Why did you do that? Change my status, I mean.”

“To reward you.” Again Jupiter’s smile faded on the hologram of the woman she portrayed. “Are you displeased?”

“No, I mean, not exactly, I just. Well, I appreciate you accepting me now and, all of that, and for letting me stay with Iason, but...”

“Speak your mind. Let us have no secrets between us.”

Yeah, like that was gonna happen, he thought and then froze, wondering if She had heard him.

“I will not invade your privacy again, have I not proven that I can be trusted not to?”

“You were in my head not ten minutes ago.”

“For only a moment as it was important that you attend Me. Such requests will only be made when they are deemed urgent.”

“Why?” Riki watched as the figure of the woman seemed to pause, as if Her program froze. Then She flickered, and was smiling again. “I mean, why am I here, really?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Again, why? I don’t need you to help me unlock my memories anymore. I’ve had some come back and the rest, well it doesn’t matter anymore now, so why did you want to see me?”

“You no longer need me?” She asked, puzzled. “You have resolved your issues?”

“More or less, yeah, so there’s no point in me coming here anymore.”

“You no longer wish to come here?”

Again he sensed something dangerous in Jupiter’s tone. “I mean, I just don’t see the point since all that stuff’s sorted now.”

“We see.” Again, the pause and flickering. “We are pleased you have resolved your issues. This will make your life more content, will it not?”

Did She notice that She was speaking in the plural again? “I guess.” When She said nothing else he continued. “So, can I go now?”

“No!” Her voice was so sharp Riki flinched in his chair, but then she was smiling again and Riki was started to get freaked out by that constant smile. “You have technical skills.”

“Yeah.” What the hell was going on?

“We have something We wish you to repair.” She rose and the lovely cottage scene evaporated except for the woman, almost ending Riki on his ass when his chair disappeared. He caught himself and straightened to his feet. “Come.” She waved him forward and then continued toward the wall, where a panel opened and She stepped through.

Riki shoved his hands in his pockets and hesitantly followed. Inside the room was an array of ancient consoles, data ports and other computer parts.

“Fix these.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They do not work.”

“Because they’re old.” He selected one of the mother boards that had no backing and exposed circuits. “Really old, they’d be better off recycled and...”

“They must be repaired.”

“Why? I mean...” He set the mother board down and picked up a cracked console. “I don’t even know if they make parts for this stuff anymore.”

Jupiter was no longer smiling and her Human visage had also disappeared to be replaced by her true cybertronic hologram. “We were led to believe your skills were considerable. Do you now admit that you are incapable of fixing these systems?”

That chilling feeling crept over Riki again. “No, I mean, I am good, I just don’t see the point of...”

“Can you only work on new systems? Do older systems not also inspire you? Must they die and be thrown away because you are not interested enough to attend to them?”

Riki stared at Her, what the hell kind of conversation was this? “I...I never said that.” He actually liked tinkering with older systems but this was all just too weird.

“Then you will fix them.”

“I...” Fuck it, if that was what She wanted, how could he argue? And it

would give him something to do until Iason got home anyway. “Okay, I can try, sure. I’ll take a few pieces home and...”

“You will work here,” Jupiter decided as the wall panel closed, locking them in.

This was not normal. This absolutely was not normal. “Uh...okay. What if I need certain pieces...” Jupiter waved her hand and a selection of cabinets against the wall opened, piled high with hardware, wires, circuits and the like. “I don’t have my tools...”

She waved to the only cleared table and there sat his tool kit, along with several other high-end tools.

“I...” He bit his lip and carefully considered his next words. “I’ll need a link to an open channel so I can check which parts go with which models, and an interface with the main system to update the programming.”

Another wall opened and a fully equipped computer terminal sat ready for him. “You will fix these.”

“And then I can go home, right?”

When She simply disappeared instead of replying, Riki tried to push against the wall where he had seen the exit but it did not budge. The room was windowless with no doors, but there was a small ventilation system so he wouldn’t run out of air. It was too small for him to fit through and attached to the ceiling, so way too high to reach.

He tried to quell his rising panic. He should have listened to Cal and let him contact Iason. Shit. Shit! Why was Jupiter doing this? To prove that he had skills? What if he couldn’t fix all of this old equipment, would he be terminated? Would Iason? Shit, shit, shit!

You will begin your task now.

Jupiter’s voice in his head made Riki realized that he didn’t have a choice, so he pulled off his jacket and began to inspect what parts he had.

Guy was going stir crazy. Shiao had been gone all day again, and he was stuck in this fucking tree house because it was too dangerous for him to go outside. Shiao could not find any paint, per-se, but he did find some nice woven rugs and a few other items to put on the walls and make them a little less dingy. It had taken Guy all of twenty minutes to decorate and now he was back to lying on the floor and staring at ceiling.

“This is nuts!” he decided and rolled to his feet.

Shiao would probably not be back until after dark again, not that Guy could tell much about when it was light or dark because the trees surrounding the house pretty much blocked the sunlight and moonlight, if there even was a moon on this stupid, fucking planet. If he sat here for one more minute, he was going to go bat-shit crazy.

Stomping into the small kitchen he grabbed the biggest knife he could find, luckily they had brought most of their good cooking utensils with them, even though he still hadn’t figure out how to cook over an actual fire stove yet. Moving into their bedroom area, he stepped into the small closet and reached up to the shelf above where he knew that Shiao kept his laser stunner. The Elite didn’t need it of course, he had purchased it for Guy, and so Guy had decided now was the time to use it.

He was a Mongrel from Ceres; he’d survived much worse than a few big rats and some huge ass trees. He could do this. He filled his back pack with two bottles of water and some dehydrated snacks, also taken from their old home, slid it over his shoulders and threw open the front door.

The silence unnerved him. It was never this quiet in the slums, had not even been this quiet on the planet where they’d lived before. Everything here was so incredibly still. He pushed back his anxiety and stepped out onto the

wide branch. Quiet was good, he decided. Quiet meant he should be able to hear anything coming at him.

Further down on the branch, where it narrowed and became indistinct of the branches of other trees, he saw long hanging vines. Was that how you climbed down? The branches themselves were too enormous and spread out to even attempt to climb from one to the other, there had to be ten or fifteen feet between each branch, so it had to be those vines.

Gathering his courage and shifting his backpack more securely across both his shoulders, he followed the branch to the end and reached for one of the many vines hanging down around it. He yanked on it, hard, and it didn't give away or snap. It almost felt like a rope, but it was rubbery. Carefully he wrapped a portion around his wrist, then swung out on it. The sense of vertigo he got from no longer being on the branch almost made him vomit, but he maintained. He figured out how to swing to another tree, then another.

Shiao had warned him of swamps and rats and sucking sand, which meant the ground was dangerous, right? If he stayed up here, in the tree-line, he should be fine. He caught another vine, swung forward, with no idea where he was going, but still determined to get there. His confidence rose with each swing, until he forgot to do the yank test on the fifth vine he grabbed before swinging his full weight onto it. The vine snapped and he cried out as he started to fall.

Something hard hit him, and then the ground that had been rushing up towards him suddenly swooped sideways. He found himself lying on something solid again and, after a brief mental check to confirm he was in one piece, he slowly got to his feet. He was on another massive branch, but how the hell had he gotten here? He could just see the top of their house and it actually looked quite far from where he was, plus he could swear that he had felt someone's arms go around him.

"Is anyone there?" he called, turning around but finding he was completely alone. "Shiao?"

The forest was still completely silent, which unnerved him more than the fall had. “If a Mongrel falls in the forest and no one hears him scream...” he muttered, unable to finish the saying because he was more than a little afraid of the answer.

Glancing back towards the house, he decided that he had already come this far, so he should keep going. Maybe if he proved to Shiao that he could adapt to life here, the locals would welcome him sooner? Not that he wanted to stay here, but if this was where Shiao was staying then so would he.

Besides, how much worse could it be than Ceres, really? There were no hulking men or gangs waiting in the shadows to beat you, rape you or steal from you. There were no police harassing you, and also sometimes beating you, whenever you stepped foot out of the slums. And best of all, there was no Fucking Blondies!

“I can do this,” he decided, adjusted his back pack and looked down again. He could almost see the ground, but he didn’t want to go there because that was where the really nasty stuff was, according to Shiao.

He grabbed a vine to swing to the next tree, then looked down. If he survived on the ground he would really impress Shiao and the natives couldn’t possibly refuse to let him stay then, right? Fuck it, he decided, he wasn’t a coward and he surely had survived worse than going up against some big rat.

Instead of swinging on the vine, he slowly climbed down it. It was still quite a long way, and it was a good thing he was in excellent shape or he’d have been too exhausted to finish and may have fallen again. He kept his eyes on the giant tree trunk in his view point, so thick he couldn’t see around it, to keep himself from getting dizzy again. It seemed to go on, several stories at least where there were no more branches just the trunk.

His hands gripped the vine tighter as he realized he was nearing the end of it, yet there was still several feet to the grassy surface he could see below him. He glanced upwards but he could no longer even see the lowest branch, it was as if the sky and clouds had swallowed them up. Should he

just climb back up? His mechanical arm would be fine, but the other one was already shaking from the effort of his descent.

“Fuck it.” He jumped the remaining feet, hit the ground painfully hard and managed to roll into it to soften the impact and hopefully not break his legs or ankles. Catching his breath, he quickly pulled the laser stunner and a flash light out of his bag.

It was darker down here, and when he glanced up all he could see was white clouds blurring the canopy of trees above, that did not leave much room for the sun to break through. Cracking his neck in preparation, he fixed the bag back on his back and switched on the flashlight, shining it on the ground so he could avoid the sucking sand that Shiao had warned him about.

“This ain’t so bad,” he decided as he walked along, being very careful where he stepped. He avoided any area that looked even remotely wet, assuming that could be a swamp. “Hello big rats, I’m not here to hurt you so please don’t fucking eat me.”

As he wandered the light grew brighter and when he glanced up he realized that he was moving away from the trees and into flatter plains and natural sunlight. Reasonably sure that he was now leaving all safety behind, yet unwilling to give in just yet, he kept the flashlight on to use on any shadowy places.

“Yeah,” he decided as he hefted his bag and began to walk with a little more confidence. “This is all right. It’s actually kinda nice. Smells clean and fresh, and lots of plants. That means it’s got lots of oxygen to breathe, right?”

Talking to himself was the best way for him to dispel his rising fear and bolster his courage, he even did it in Ceres. Of course in Ceres, he usually had Riki to talk to, but then, he was never scared when he was with Riki.

“You’d love this place, man,” Guy decided as he stopped and spun around to look up and down, taking in all his surroundings. A shadow passed over

him and he saw one of those enormous birds flying overhead again. “So cool.”

A sudden sharp sound behind him spinning around, just as an enormous rat charged him. Forgetting that he had a stunner in his hand, Guy reacted as he always had when challenged, he shot out his fist. He connected with the enormous beast’s snout, and he yelp in surprise, before its razor-sharp teeth sank into Guy’s metal arm.

Almost immediately the rodent shook its head and backed off, not liking the taste of metal and circuitry at all, and Guy used it to his advantage, swinging that same arm out and catching the rat again on the nose. The rat howled and charged again, this time knocking Guy to the ground.

Sweet Christ it really was big, Guy thought in a mild panic. The rat’s body was longer than his own and twice as wide. Guy managed to catch the jaws snapping at his face and hold them mere inches away from his throat while its sharp claws tore into the flesh of his arm and legs.

“Fuck you stink!” he yelled when it slid out a long, leathery tongue to slide across Guy’s face. “Dis...gust...ing!” Guy exclaimed as he turned his head sharply and bit down on the offensive tongue.

The rat howled and scurried off him, long enough for him to remember the stunner, but when he spotted it, the handle was all that was visible as it sank beneath a weird, gooey green and brown pit. The sucking sand! He turned back just in time to see the rat charge him again, but in a flash he had the kitchen knife in his hand and thrust it, up to the hilt, into the creature’s underbelly.

Blood and guts spurted over him as the rat screamed and thrashed, but Guy quickly rolled out from under it and got to his feet. The creature growled and tried to get up to charge again, already shaky on its feet so Guy kicked at it. It was unstable enough to send it rolling into the pit of sand where his weapon had disappeared.

Now the rat was really screaming, fearfully screaming as it tried to get purchase away from the sucking death, but the quicker it moved the quicker

the sand sucked it under. Guy watched until the end as the giant rat disappeared, and only when the sand was smooth again did he drop to his knees and let himself catch his breath.

He did it, he thought deliriously. He killed an ROUS, and yet he knew that if there had been more of them, or if he had not noticed the sand he could have easily been the one to die. Maybe Shiao was right about this place and it was too dangerous for him? No, fuck that. He'd just killed a giant mother fucking rat. He wasn't some kid who needed to be protected, he was a fucking mongrel from Ceres.

Another shadow fell over him, quickly dimming the light, and he looked up, expecting to see another bird, but it was clouds. Really, really dark clouds. "Shit." He grabbed up his back pack, which had been knocked off him in the attack, found the flashlight and started running back the way he had come, just as the first few giant drops of rain started to fall.

He had no idea what kind of weather patterns this place had, but when it rained in Ceres it stormed hellfire, because the desert planet so rarely had rain. The ground beneath him became mud far too quickly, hindering his ability to run and sucking at his feet, despite the speed with which he attempted to move them.

Did the swamps suck you down too, he wondered? He was trying to stay on the same path he had taken, but it got so dark so quickly and he was going back much faster than when he had started out. He tripped over something and went flying, losing the flashlight and his sense of direction almost instantaneously. Something hard hit his head, the ground maybe? Then something heavy fell across him, even as lightening streaked across the sky and lit up the entire area for a full twenty seconds.

Guy screamed at the hideous face that was before him, and swung out, but his fist was knocked back. He tried to swing with his mechanical arm and that too was blocked, then pinned to his side. He saw a weird sort of flute and then a menacing grin before lips covered a part of the flute. He started to say Shiao's name, but something pinched his neck and darkness claimed him.

Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze finishes up some work.

Notes for the Chapter:

Short chapter I know, but I will try and upload another one in a few days. Thank you everyone for all the great reviews! Please keep them coming!

Katze turned off the car, lit a cigarette and allowed the flame of his lighter to illuminate his face in the darkened interior momentarily, then quickly extinguished it. He cracked his window and allowed the exhaled smoke to filter outside. Usually he didn't meet contacts face to face, but this was a delicate situation and besides, he'd known this one for several years. Well, as much as anyone could know someone in the black-market trade business, where no one used real names or identities and all meeting were in secret.

He inhaled slowly as he thought back to the events of the day. He'd known that Iason's friend Carrie was some sort of mutant cat creature, but he had never watched her transform and he had to admit, it had been a fascinating sight. Gathering her clothes made him realize that she would be completely naked when she turned back into her Human form, but he couldn't go after her until Iason dismissed him.

Iason had never mentioned why he had wanted Lane DeBaur, and Katze had never asked, as such things were not his business. He searched for and located the man and brought him here to Amoi, as Iason had ordered him to do, but he had assumed the Blondie had a business reason for wanting the man, something specific. Learning it was revenge on behalf of someone else, well, that had given Katze a moment of surprise. Iason rarely did anything for another, and then only if it benefited him. Katze could not figure out what the benefit had been to make Carrie face this man that had obviously hurt and betrayed her in some way. What was Iason expecting to receive from such a deed?

He spotted the other car approaching and stepped out onto the dark, deserted road. A single figure stepped out of the back of the vehicle and moved forward so that the headlights of his vehicle both illuminated him but also cast him in shadow. They nodded to each other.

“Fresh?” the man asked as he moved forward and Katze noticed that this man was not his usual contact.

“Reasonably.” Katze pulled out the stunner at his back. “Who the fuck are you?”

The man lifted his hands peaceably. “Relax. Lojo’s been laid up and couldn’t be here. We had a break out in the north wing and he got caught up in.”

Katze’s aim did not waiver. “Then why did he accept the deal?”

“He can still deal with the communications but both his legs are busted to pieces, man. He sent me to do the physical pick up. Come on, you know me. I’ve been with Lojo before.”

That was true enough, Katze decided, he had seen the man a few times before, usually doing the heavy lifting. He slowly lowered his weapon. “Try anything and you’re dead.”

“Nothing to try. Just wanna get what we came for, but you know the rules. I gotta see the product before we can make the deal.”

Katze nodded toward the trunk and watched the man walk around him. He appeared to lean against the car, nonchalantly, but his stunner remained by his side, just in case. Knowing a man for years did not make them a friend, it only meant that they hadn’t had the chance yet to betray him. More so when it was just a pee-on showing up instead of the regular customer.

The man opened the trunk, pulled out an illuminator stick to dispel the shadows and found a bound passenger, who was whimpering in a strange gurgling sound. He was missing his eyes, ears and tongue. “Woah! What the hell did he do?”

“Does it matter?”

The man shook his head. “No, not really.”

The illuminator stick was waved over the body for inspection. The product was fit, had a good body, even if it was a bit older than the gangs liked, and no one would be looking at his face, so the missing features wouldn’t matter. Some of the more sadistic fucks would probably enjoy it more, actually.

The man waved to someone in the darkness and two others stepped out of the car to walk over and lift Lane DeBaur out of the trunk. Katze kept one hand discretely on his weapon, and stared at the cigarette in his hand rather than the mess of Humanity they carried passed him.

By the time Iason had called for Katze to return to the room in the basement, Iason had already completed DeBaur’s punishment, as Iason saw fit. Having been witnessed to Iason’s brutality on several occasions, Katze found the sight of their prisoner more disturbing than he usually would. Perhaps he was growing soft?

Debaur had passed out from the pain, though Katze was reasonably sure that he was awake for most of it; Iason would have insisted on that, and what was left was a bloody, mangled disfigured man. Iason had ordered Katze to clean and cauterize the wounds, as he wanted Lane DeBaur to live a good long while, and then dispatch the man to a dealer.

Katze had done as he was told, shot Debaur full of antibiotics and used a healing wand on the stumps of his ears and eyes. It wouldn’t make them grow back, but it would heal cleanly, free from infection, even if the man would never be able to speak, see or hear again. All he could do now was feel, and Iason had decided that feeling would be the best form for his next torture.

“Last rites?”

“At your discretion,” Katze returned blandly.

He doubted that DeBaur would survive very long, despite the treatment he had received after the brutality, but he felt not one ounce of sympathy for the man. One couldn't be sympathetic or compassionate while working for Iason Mink, not without losing his life to despair and guilt, or to an angry Blondie for not following orders.

The prison planet Kunjo Den was always looking for new toys for their inmates, but they demanded that the subjects be in good physical shape, which DeBaur was, if you didn't count what Iason had done to him, and his wounds had been efficiently treated in order that he maintain health, if not comfort.

The gangs on Kunjo Den would use DeBaur continuously, until his body just gave out, and when that happened they usually offered their prime suppliers the right of disposal, in case they wanted the body to harvest the organs and make a little extra coin. Katze, however, left it to his buyer's discretion, which meant he was giving them carte blanche to do whatever they wanted with the body afterwards. This might include tossing it in with the necrophiliacs to play with until the corpse started to rot and decay or cutting it up as meat to toss over the prison walls to exiles.

"Okay then." The buyer offered a case with the preferred payment then waved as he set off back to his own vehicle. "Enjoy the Eclipse."

"You as well." Katze waited until they got in their vehicle and left before he climbed into his own. His wrist unit chimed and he saw Raoul's face fill the small screen.

"Where are you?"

"Out."

"What are you doing?"

"Recycling some trash."

"Come to my lab, the one I took you to before."

“Now?”

“Yes now, would I call you now if I expected you to come yesterday?”

“I have a meeting in about twenty minutes.”

“How long will you be?”

“Awhile.”

“How long is awhile?”

“As long as it takes.”

“Can’t you blow it off? Isn’t this more important?”

“No.”

Raoul wondered which of his questions Katze was saying no to, or if it was no to both. Cheeky devil. “You are such a stimulating conversationalist, Katze.”

Katze smirked.

“At least give me an estimate time of arrival. An hour? Three? A day? A week?”

Katze decided to give the Blondie a break. “Two hours, tops, and that should include the time it will take me to get to your lab.”

“Do you remember how to get there?”

“Yes. I’ll come by right after my meeting.”

“That is acceptable, as I have other work to keep me busy.”

“You mean I’m not your priority?” Katze shot in a teasing reply and immediately wanted to retract it when he saw Raoul’s eyes narrow.

“You are foremost on my mind, however I do have other projects that require my attention so I will not need to, what is that saying, twaddle my tums waiting for you to arrive.”

“Thumbs!” the chuckle was out before Katze could stop it. “Twiddle your thumbs.”

“Ah, twiddle, twaddle.” Raoul lifted up a loved thumb and inspected it. “It seems an odd sort of activity to pursue regardless.” He knew, of course, the correct phrasing, but he found that he enjoyed drawing a reaction from Katze. “Do not keep me waiting. I wish to conclude this phase before the Eclipse. I assume you will also be attending the celebration at Iason’s tomorrow?”

“Yes, he invited me.”

“And will you drink his wine, since you always refuse to drink mine?”

“Iason has never drugged me with his drinks, you have.”

“Am I to be penalized forever more, for once small, insignificant instance?”

“Yes.”

Raoul chuckled. “I will see you shortly.”

Katze ended the transmission and sighed. What a pain in the ass. Still, he was curious as to what Raoul had come up with this time. Maybe he’d find the cure for his blackouts and...Katze’s heard his door open a second too late, and reached for his weapon even as the voltage from the stunner seared through his body.

In a dimly lit room a cloaked figure sat in a chair shrouded in shadow. A door opened, allowing a momentary element of light, but then just as quickly closed, as a small form was tossed at the figure’s feet.

“Did you have trouble finding him?” the cloaked person asked the two men as they stepped inside the room.

“Nah, there aren’t too many of his kind wandering around.”

The cloaked form rose, crouched and with a gloved hand, caught the chin of the captive. Pure unadulterated hatred stared back at him, and perhaps a hint of madness as well. “He is covered in bruises.”

“We didn’t do that.” One of the men assured. “That’s just how we found him.”

“I see.” The tape was pulled from the child’s mouth. “Do you require medical assistance?”

The young captive, unable to support himself with his hands and feet bound, spit at the figure.

“Interesting.” A small swatch of cloth was removed from the figure’s cloak and wiped across his shadowed face. “You have devolved from what you once were, but we can work with that.” The boy was gripped by the shoulders and lifted until his feet were dangling several feet from the floor. “Would you like to help us, child? Shall we both seek satisfaction for the injustice done to us?” When the boy refused to answer, he was dropped back on the floor. “No? Then we shall put you back where we found you.”

“Kill them.”

The cloaked form turned back and watched the bound boy lever into a kneeling position. “Pardon?”

“If you let me kill them, I will do anything you ask.”

“Who exactly is it you wish to kill?”

“You know. You must know or why come to find me?”

“Our information seems validated. You *are* an intelligent boy and also...” A glint of a very white smile with perfect teeth appeared within the folds of

the black hood. “Ruthless. We believe your desires can be arranged.” The figure waved at the men and they crouched to release the boy’s bonds. The prisoner rose as his mysterious benefactor held out a gloved hand. “Do we have an accord...” Now, Red eyes glowed beneath the hooded cloak. “Bean, wasn’t it?”

Bean took the hand, nodded and then returned to his knees to bow before his new Master.

Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason has some concerns. Riki makes it back to Iason and Katze is held captive.

WARNING- FINAL SCENE CONTAINS GRAPHIC VIOLENCE AND RAPE.

Do not read if you think this will upset you, just wait for the next update to see a general description of what happened.

Iason blinked as a communication alert beeped on his wrist unit. Glancing around he tried to recall when he had come back to his office. He remembered dealing with DeBaur and then leaving Katze to finish up. He had driven away from the warehouse and searched for Carrie after that, finding her several miles away, walking naked along the road and shivering. He had given her his cloak and taken her home and then...

“How is this possible?” he murmured as he searched his memory for the missing time. He had dropped Carrie off over 4.34 hours ago. He could not recall driving back to his office, and there was no work in front of him that he could have been completing. Had he just been sitting here all that time dormant?

The signal sounded again and he opened the channel on his wrist unit.
“Yes? What is it?”

“Sir,” Cal greeted. “I apologize for disturbing you, but I am worried about Master Riki.”

“Why, what’s happened?”

“He received a summons to go and see Jupiter, Sir.”

Odd, Iason thought. Why hadn’t Jupiter contacted him to bring Riki to her?
“She probably wished to speak with him regarding the trip to Avalon, it is

not that strange.”

“Sir, that was almost six hours ago.”

“Six hours?” Iason straightened. “He hasn’t returned?”

“No. I checked the usual places he frequents, and I also tried to contact Miss Carrie to see if she had heard from him, but she was not answering her link.”

No, Iason thought, she was probably still very deep in mourning over meeting with DeBaur. Iason glanced at the ring on his left hand, a reminder of the one Riki wore, which had a tracking device. But he had promised not to use it unless it was absolutely necessary. “Could he be out for a ride?”

“His air bike is in the garage. I checked with some of the vendors in the market place, in case he might be doing some work for someone, but no one has seen him, not even Eos Security.”

What to do? What to do? Iason wondered. What he wanted to do was use the tracer, but if he did that and Riki was just off on a jaunt somewhere and found out he’d know that Iason broke his promise. Getting Riki to trust him had been a difficult process, he could not lose that.

“Katze?” Iason murmured to himself, but Cal heard him and responded.

“I left him a message, Sir, but he has not yet responded.” Cal scowled.
“What should we do?”

Iason nodded, Katze must still be dealing with DeBaur, he couldn’t pull him away from that to look for Riki. “You said it’s been six hours?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He had no memory for the last almost four hours. If Riki had been missing for six, then he would have left to see Jupiter around the same time that he was with Carrie and DeBaur. Could Riki still be with Jupiter? He didn’t see how, not even his own sessions had lasted more than two hours. He couldn’t

use the tracer, but he could go to speak with Jupiter himself and learn Riki's whereabouts. Perhaps She might also be able to explain his missing time.

"I'll take care of it, but let me know if he returns home."

"Yes, Sir."

Iason closed his eyes and reached out his mind to his creator, startled to find a solid barrier formed against him. He rose, then grabbed his cloak and headed out. He'd go directly to Her tower then, he thought, but when he came to the secured portal that would lead him inside, he was denied access by security.

"What do you mean, denied?" he demanded. "I am Iason Mink! I must speak with Jupiter immediately!"

"Jupiter cannot be disturbed at this time."

What? Jupiter had never refused to see him. "It's important..."

"Jupiter cannot be disturbed at this time."

"Tell her Riki is missing! Can you at least..."

"The High Prince Consort will be released when his work is done."

Work? What work could Riki be doing? "So he is here?"

"Jupiter cannot be disturbed at this time."

Iason moved forward, about to force his way inside when the guards received a communiqué through their headsets, they stepped aside. Iason stepped through the portal but instead of being directed to Jupiter's inner sanctum, as he usually was, he found himself in the cold, sterile environment of her outer chamber.

Your mate is assisting us. Jupiter advised telepathically as Her usual cybernetic form floated towards him. He will be released when his work is complete.

May I see him? Iason asked in the same manner. What about dinner? He needs to eat...

All his needs will be met. You may go. Jupiter's form disappeared and Iason was alone.

Where is he? Can I see him at least? Silence was his only response. "Jupiter, why are you holding him here?" He continued aloud. "What work can Riki possibly be doing for you?" When no response was forthcoming he continued. "He is mine! I have the right to know what you are doing with him!"

The wall to his left shimmered and became transparent and there sat Riki on the floor amongst hundreds of equipment parts, he had shed his jacket and his front shirt which left him in just his jeans and the tank.

Iason rushed forward and placed his hand on the wall. "Riki! Riki!"

Riki continued what he was doing, using a laser tool on the hard drive in his lap. He suddenly set it aside, and started looking through the pieces around him, collected two and slid them together, then fused it to the hard drive. Iason banged on the wall, shouted but Riki apparently couldn't hear him as he just continued to work.

You have seen that he is unharmed. You will leave now.

Iason didn't like this, he didn't like it at all, but he had to trust that Jupiter had a reason for doing this, though he honestly could not fathom what that reason could be. Unable to reach Riki and unwilling to anger Jupiter, Iason had no choice but to leave.

Riki heard a quiet humming sound and his eyes fluttered open. He blinked a few times, tried to remember where he was, then winced as his back

spasmed from sleeping on the floor. He'd fixed all but two of the machines in the room where Jupiter had locked him, but he must have passed out from sheer exhaustion.

He couldn't be sure any of them would work for very long. The old power cells they were built with were non-existent and the new ones would be two powerful and would probably overload the system within a week. But he'd fixed them and that had to count for something.

Sitting up, he saw that the wall was open, allowing a view of the outside chamber. He slowly got to his feet, stretched and then grabbed his shirt and jacket, and a data disc from the table, which he slid into the pocket of his jacket. He moved towards the open wall.

"Is that it?" he called out when he found himself still alone in the chamber. "Can I go now?" No response. He looked at his watch it was just after three in the morning; Iason was going to go ballistic. "Are you there?" Still nothing. "Okay, well, I'm leaving now."

He moved to the exit portal, surprised to find it would let him through and two guards met him to escort him to the portal that would take him back to the main hub of Eos. He stepped through and relief filled him when he found himself outside Iason's condo. He stepped in and rode the elevator up, tiredly reached for the door to the condo, only to have it flung open by Iason.

"Riki!"

He was enveloped in warm, familiar arms and lifted off his feet as Iason carried him across the threshold and over to the sofa, settling him across his lap.

"Are you well? You look so tired? Did you just finish now? Are you hungry?"

"Ssshhh." Riki managed to slap a hand against Iason's mouth to silence him. "Just take me to bed, okay?"

“Of course.” Iason lifted him again and carried Riki up the stairs to their room. He had already dismissed Cal for the night, and he’d developed a severe headache from his verbal duels with Yielo who insisted she be told where her Maku was. He finally slipped a sedative in her drink just to get her to shut up. Did she think he wasn’t just as worried? Riki had been with Jupiter, so no harm would have come to him, but the idea of Riki being kept from him filled him with anger and worry.

Iason quickly undressed Riki, who was too tired to protest that he could do it himself. He then stripped off his own clothes and pulled the sheets over them both. “What happened?”

“She wanted me to fix some computers.”

“Computers? But why?”

“Dunno,” Riki exhausted, turned into Iason and closed his eyes. “I think it was a test.”

“A test? What sort of test?”

“Dunno.” Riki yawned and started to drift. “Can we talk later? I’m really tired.”

“Yes, of course. Go to sleep.” Iason held onto Riki, however, unwilling to completely let him go now that he had him back.

He had been so bewildered and angry with Jupiter at keeping Riki from him, that he had forgotten to ask Her about his missing time. Now, he was glad he had. Something was off here, something did not feel quite right and he would have to start digging to get the truth. It was not something he particularly wanted to do, but he had to find out the reasons behind his recent behavior. He had to know what was happening, and if a new threat might soon be upon them.

“Who do you work for?”

“Your mother, she told me to tell you to stop being such a fuck up and call her more often.” Katze was prepared for the next punch, and spit the blood out of his mouth from where they had repeatedly hit in the face.

He’d been set up, and he had been careless. He’d been thinking about Raoul and if the Blondie would ever actually find the method to curing his black outs. He had not listening to his senses and paying attention. When the man who met him was not his regular contact, he should have left right then, that was his number one rule for Jupiter’s sake! Instead, he’d dismissed the matter and foolishly let himself get close enough to be captured.

They’d shocked him with an electric wand, he remembered that part vividly, and when he woke up he was bound to a chair in some dimly lit room with a spotlight shining on him, while keeping his assailant’s faces in shadow. That had been hours ago, or perhaps it was days. He had lost track of the number of times he had lost conscious as they worked him over, then revived him for another go. All he could taste in his mouth was his own blood and his ribs were on fire, so he was reasonably sure at least one or two were broken. One of his eyes was swollen shut, the other was starting to close. His vision was blurred so badly he wouldn’t be able to identify any of his attackers, even if they weren’t keeping the damned spotlight on him.

One of the men grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head back hard enough he thought it might actually rip open his throat.

“Make it easier on yourself, man. We can do this all night.”

Had he been here all night? All day? He really had no idea. “That’s what she said!” Katze tossed and grimaced as a knife was put to his throat. “Is this any way to treat your future father-in-law?” He felt the prick of the knife against his skin.

“Heine!” One of the others, still standing in the shadows warned. “He can’t talk if he’s dead.”

“Oh ho, now I know your name, big boy,” Katze taunted. “Somebody’s in trouble now. Just wait till your mother hears...” The man slapped Katze across the face with the flat of the knife in warning.

“You fucking idiot!” Heine hissed to the one who had spoken.

“You really are an idiot,” Katze agreed and winced again as the man yanked harder on his hair. “Easy! That’s not a wig you’re pulling!”

“Shut up!” Heine released Katze’s hair, suddenly cut the bonds holding him to the chair, but the binders on his hands remained. He yanked Katze to his feet and Katze realized, as he saw the number of shadows in front of him, that there were too many of them for him to fight. He let himself be dragged to a post in the middle of the warehouse. “Tie him.”

The others strapped his wrists to a hook that hung overhead, stripped off his jacket, then ripped down his trousers so they bunched at his ankles.

“Lookie here, boy! We got us a Furniture!”

“That means he belongs to an Elite!” One of them insisted excitedly.

“Sure does, now we just got to figure out which one.”

“I’m not Furniture,” Katze denied. “Not anymore.”

“Oh, why not?”

“I ran away from my Master.”

“Did you? Well, then, I bet he’d like to have you back. Who was your Master?”

“He’s dead. He died a long time ago, that’s why I ran away and...”

“Bullshit!”

“It’s not. I ran away and went into business at the warehouse. I’m just a facilitator. I don’t...”

“You think you’re cute, and that’s okay.” Heine said as the light again moved so Katze was spotlighted. “You know what I think? I think you still have a Master and you’re still working for him. You’re loyal, I respect that, but we will get it out of you one way or the other.” He nodded to someone behind him and a huge man moved forward.

Katze’s eyes widened for a second, this was going to hurt, he thought, just before the brute’s fist landed in his gut. Then another, and a third, hard enough that he’d almost vomited up the lunch he’d eaten earlier.

“Who do you work for?”

Katze glared at him stonily and received another blow, this one to his side, then a second and he felt another rib crack. He released an unsteady breath. “O...Okay,” he managed and swallowed back the pain. “I’ll...tell you.”

“Spill.” Heine waved the brute off and stepped closer. “Who’s your boss?”

“He’s from Earth.”

“New Earth?”

“Old Earth. Goes by the name of Bird. Big Bird. He’s a mafia boss for pigeon...Ooof!” Another excruciating snap, fuck me, Katze thought as he wheezed through his teeth. How many ribs would they break before a vital organ was punctured? What was that, three, four broken ribs now? These guys weren’t playing around.

“My boy here is just getting started, so it’s no skin off us if you want him to break you to apart one piece at a time.” Heine grabbed Katze by the hair again and stared into his eyes. “Make it easy on yourself. It’s gonna get worse, a whole lot worse, so why subject yourself to that kind of pain and humiliation? Just tell me the name of your Master, Furniture.”

My boy. Come see my boy. Get over here boy, time to earn your keep. Katze could feel himself start to float. No! He couldn’t black out, he couldn’t! If he regressed he might reveal everything about Iason to these punks. Would his young self even know Iason? He couldn’t take the chance.

“I have no Master.” He winced as Heine grabbed his throat and squeezed.

“You sure about that?”

Katze managed to meet the other man’s gaze with the one eye that wasn’t yet swollen shut. “Fuck you.” He needed to piss them off more, he needed to...His head snapped up as he felt someone move behind him, grab his hips and push something horrifically familiar against him.

“Guess you ain’t never been had by a man, have you, Furniture?” the brute whispered in his ear.

No. No, no, no. Katze swallowed and realized that he had no choice now, no choice at all, and damn but it pissed him off. Still, his tongue slid over his ‘special’ tooth, which he had replaced just earlier that morning, but it broke in half just as Heine punched him in the face. The poison tip flew from his mouth and landed on the floor. Shit! Shit! Fuck!

The big guy pushed against him again and Katze resigned himself to what was about to happen. “It won’t make me talk,” he murmured, because it was true, but it might make him regress and that would be so much worse.

“That’s a real nice wrist unit you got there,” Heine said suddenly as he reached up toward the device on the wrist dangling over their heads. “Bet you got all kinds of information on there.”

Shit! “Nah, I just use it to watch porn,” Katze tossed and grimaced as Heine tried to find a way to unfasten the wrist unit, then when he couldn’t he tried to rip it off. “It’s fused to my skin!”

“Oh is it now?” Heine grabbed a chair, stood up on it and slid the blade of his knife across Katze’s wrist, leaving a stinging gash that trickled red as it started to drip down his arm and onto the floor. “How about we just cut it off then?”

Fuck! If the unit no longer contact with his skin the hologram he used would no longer work, and just how would he explain that? He started to

struggle, really struggle as he felt the guy behind him push against him again, only this time there was no cloth separating them.

“Don’t!” he ground out as he felt the man’s cock breach his ass. “Please don’t...”

“Don’t what?” Heine inquired, glancing down at Katze. “Don’t let my fella fuck you, or don’t cut your wrist off?”

Daddy please stop. Please, please stop, it hurts!

Heine’s face moved to within a millimeter from Katze’s, so close he could smell the onions the asshole had eaten earlier.

“You tell us who your Master is, all this goes away.”

His heart, and the fear surging inside of it, screamed at him to admit the truth, to admit to anything just to avoid what was about to happen, but Katze had never allowed himself to be ruled by his emotions and so he clamped down on the terror and shame for the frightened child he had been and responded as the man he had become.

“When I get free I’m gonna rip your head off and shit down your neck, you putrid Motherfucker!” He spat in Heine’s face. “And for Jupiter’s sake invest in a fucking breath mint.”

The brute suddenly pushed forward and Katze bit through his lip at the harsh, dry agony of the rape, as he struggled to keep himself together. He felt another slice on his wrist. Iason! What should he do? What could he do? He could feel each and every thrust from the man behind him, and yet he could no longer react to it. His breath was coming in harsh, shallow gasps as his mind kept pulling him in two different directions.

His father’s voice. ***That’s it boy. Take it all. That’s it.***

Iason’s voice. ***You must never reveal what you know, Katze. I am placing my trust in you.***

If you cry it starts all over. Only babies cry, so you keep those eyes dry, boy and just lay there and let them fuck you.

It would be a waste to terminate someone with such considerable skills. No, I have a better use for you.

Your mother was a bitch. She left you here with me to pay for what she stole from me, and you're gonna make me lots of money, boy. Lots and lots of money.

I know I can trust you to look after Riki for me. I would not ask this of anyone but you, Katze, because you have never disappointed me.

Ain't good for nothin' but being fucked.

Your skills are impressive.

Waste of space!

You are the best Furniture I've ever had.

You're useless.

I trust you.

You're nothing.

You're the only one who can do this for me.

Katze felt himself losing the battle, felt the floating feeling returning and beginning to overwhelm him. His father's voice was drowning out Iason's, and then another voice entered the fray.

Think of me, of this one thing that you so enjoy.

Katze's head snapped up as Raoul's words sounded in his head and he clung to them in desperation. He pushed away his father's voice, even Iason's voice and filled his thoughts with food, of the dishes he liked to cook, of the ones he wanted to try. He thought of recipes and spices and what wines to

serve with each meal. He thought of the next meal he would cook for Raoul, how he would make it three courses and include desert.

A particularly brutal shove from behind shattered his thoughts as the pain became unbearable and he could feel his mind trying to escape from it again, he could feel himself blacking out to let the child return, because the child could deal with rape. The child could deal with anything.

He was so close to falling over the edge that he was unaware that the assaults on his body had stopped until Heine grabbed him by the chin and forced Katze to look at him.

“You still with us, man?” he sneered, now off his chair and standing in front of him. Katze could feel something wet running down the back of his legs and realized that the Brute had come inside of him, or perhaps it was blood? He shuddered as his father’s image pushed forward again. “You ready to talk yet, or should I see how much you like that wrist unit of yours?”

Katze’s dulled eyes widened at the sight of the laser scalpel Heine now had in his hand, which would cut all the way through bone. “Yes,” he murmured and watched Heine’s eyes narrow on him.

“Who do you work for?”

Katze whispered something unintelligible.

“What was that?” Heine demanded and Katze did it again. Heine assumed that their captive was now broken and had barely the energy to speak. He smiled and moved his face closer. “Come on man, that’s it, gimmie a name and all this pain goes away.”

Katze shakily lifted his head as Heine put his head closer to hear, then he chomped down viciously on the soft tissue.

Heine screamed and ripped his head away, leaving part of his upper ear still between Katze’s teeth.

Katze grinned and spit out the offensive piece of tissue. “You have no idea the holy hell you are about to unleash on yourself,” he stated with a calmness he did not feel. This was not a frightened child or an obedient Furniture now, this was Dark Katze, the most feared Black –Market dealer in the quadrant. “Nothing you do to me will save you from what is about to happen. Nothing you fear will be as terrible as what you’ve unleashed.”

Several of the people behind Heine, took an uneasy step back at the change in his demeanor.

“You mother fucker!” Heine screamed holding his bleeding ear. “Fucking mother fucking...” Enraged Heine smashed his fist into Katze’s face, twice started the former Furniture’s nose bleeding again, it had been broken hours ago.

Katze simply smiled as the blood dripped down his face and into his already bleeding mouth, making him look some kind of cheerful vampire. “There will be no mercy. There will be no easy death, just pain. Lots and lots of pain, in lots of different ways and death will become something you pray for.”

“Fuck you!” Heine screamed even as several of his people actually turned and ran away. “Where the fuck you going?” And then to his few remaining followers. “Bring me the grips!”

Katze glanced down as someone grabbed his leg and slid it into a gravity boot, firmly anchoring his foot to the floor. He didn’t even have the chance to ask why before Heine swung a sledgehammer down into his right ankle. His scream echoed off the walls, but Heine wasn’t done and before he could catch his breath he felt the sledgehammer slam into his back, felt it break and suddenly he had no more breath to scream.

“Fuck, man,” The brute muttered. “You kill him?”

Heine dropped the sledgehammer even as one of his minions ran over with a rag to put to his ear. “Nah, you’re not dead yet, are ya?” Once more he grabbed Katze by the hair and forced his gaze upwards. “We got lots more we can do to ya before that happens.”

“Kill me,” Katze whispered. “I d...dare you to k...kill me.”

The pain chorusing through him was unlike anything he had ever felt, so much so that his fear of regression was no longer even an issue. He wanted the floating feeling back, he prayed for any other feeling that could replace this ripe, raw agony.

“Nah, we ain’t gonna kill ya,” Heine refused. “What was it you said, Death will become something you pray for? Well, start prayin you asshole.”

“Wait!” Katze croaked as Heine started to swing the sledgehammer again. “Can...I make a request?”

“What, you want a pain killer?” Heine sneered. “Maybe a mar-fucking-tini?”

“A...a cigarette?”

“Sorry, we’re all out.”

“My...jacket. In my jacket is a pack. I’ll tell you anything, for a cigarette.”

“Fuck it, let him have one,” the brute said. “He just had sex for the first time, and you fucking broke his back and he’s still conscious. He deserves a fucking cigarette.”

Heine caught the jacket that one of the shadows tossed him. “Which pocket?”

Katze struggled to remember. All he could feel, all he could think was pain. “L...left.”

Heine pulled out the pack and held them away when Katze lurched forward, even though he couldn’t do much with his hands tied above him. “A name first.”

Katze shook his head. “Then you won’t give it to me.”

“I’ll give you the fucking smoke, but I want a name first.”

Katze seemed to struggle with his choice then nodded. “Laren,” he whispered dejectedly. “Laren Bol.”

“Where can we find him?”

“I need a cigarette, please!” Katze didn’t have to fake his body shaking and shivering because he was so very close to blacking out and he knew he had to end this now, before it went any further.

“Where?”

“Mormer Prime.”

“What does...”

“For fuck sake, man,” the brute growled and stepped forward, snatching the cigarettes from Heine. “He’s cooperating, give him the fucking smoke!” He looked at the solid pack in his hand and moved closer to Katze, but not too close because he remembered what happened to Heine. “How do you open it, man?”

“P...press the top right c...corner.”

His rapist did as he was told and a cigarette popped out of the holder. “There we go.” He pulled the cigarette out. “Your tight ass was the best I had in awhile.”

Katze tried not to puke as a single cigarette was placed between his trembling lips.

“See, you just gotta talk right to us and we’ll be nice, right?” He used the lighter attached to the pack and lit the cigarette. “That’s better, right?”

“Yes,” Katze admitted as he inhaled deeply and a single tear slid down his cheek as he felt the poison of the Black Moon cigarette fill his lungs and make him slightly light headed. He didn’t want to die, he realized, and he remembered that he’d made a promise to Raoul not to try something like

this again. It was a promise he couldn't keep. "I'm sorry," he said aloud, knowing the Blondie would never hear him.

"Hey, it's okay." The brute took the cigarette from Katze and inhaled it himself. "Hey, that's real smooth." He took two more puffs, then held it to Katze's lips again. "We're all friends here, now, right?"

"Yeah." Katze lifted his eyes to the large man and held as he inhaled deeply again. "Friends," he managed, and his last thought was of Raoul, even as the darkness claimed him.

Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and Raoul search for Katze

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone for the reviews. I know the last chapter was very difficult to read, it was very difficult to write, and I am very sorry that I made any of you cry. :-(So I am uploading this short chapter early and the next chapter will probably be about a week or so because I am getting busy again. Again thank you all very much for the heart felt reviews, and I hope you can forgive me for hurting Katze.

Raoul glanced at his watch and scowled. Katze had said that he would come by after his meeting, yet he still wasn't here. He'd tried to call the black-market dealer several times, but there had been no answer and he hadn't bothered to leave a message. He wondered if his wrist unit was still acting up? He'd purchased a new one and had it triple checked for accuracy, plus his call earlier had gone through, so that couldn't be the reason.

He glanced at the time, just a few minutes before dawn. Katze would never have stood him up like this. He rose and walked to his console to engage a link with Iason's home terminal.

"Yes?" Cal answered, looking alert and professional despite the early hour.

"I need to speak with Iason. It's urgent."

"One moment please."

Raoul waited and a moment later Iason appeared in a robe, so he had obviously still been in bed. "Have you seen our friend?" he demanded

without preamble.

Iason knew who Raoul meant and appreciated his brother omitting Katze's name, but his home terminal was more secure than his office one, so there was no concern of breach. "Often."

"Have you seen him recently?"

"I was with him in the afternoon yesterday. Why?"

"He was supposed to meet me last night but he never showed."

"Perhaps something has come up to detain him? He was running some errands for me."

"Until this time of the morning?"

"His business can often run into unforeseen circumstances that may result in him missing an appointment."

"Without him notifying me that he would be missing it?"

Iason paused, sat forward in his chair. "Not usually, no. When did last speak with him?"

"Approximately twelve and a half hours ago. We agreed to meet and he said he would be no more than two hours, but he is not answering his link and I have not heard from him since."

"Let me try him and I will contact you back."

"Yes, please do."

Raoul signed off and Iason immediately sent his emergency code to Katze's wrist unit. Katze had five minutes to respond, and when he did not, Iason sent it again. The second time the signal went unanswered he opened a drawer, pulled out a device and pushed back from the desk.

“Are you going out?” Riki asked sleepily as Iason entered the bedroom and started to dress.

“Yes,” the Blondie replied.

“Where are you going?” Riki demanded tossing back the covers and rising, something in Iason’s eyes worried him.

“Katze has gone missing.”

“What? When? How?”

“Within the last twelve hours, according to Raoul.”

Riki smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe he’s just avoiding Raoul?”

“No. There is a signal I use for him whenever it is of the utmost urgency. He had five minutes to reply. I sent it twice and there was no reply. That is unlike him. He knows I will worry if he does not respond.”

Riki scowled. “Do you think he’s in trouble?”

“I do not know anything at this point, but that I must find him.”

“We.” Riki grabbed his jeans and shrugged into them. “I’m coming too.”

“Riki, it may be dangerous...”

“All the more reason for me to go.” Riki slid on a shirt and his boots then stepped out of the bedroom. “What are you waiting for, come on?”

“I believe it would be best if you remained here,” Iason argued as they started down the stairs and were met by Cal at the front door, who offered Iason his cloak and Riki his red leather jacket.

“I believe it would be best to take me with you. I’m good in a fight.”

“There may not even be any fighting.”

“I’m going, Iason. Now do you want to stand here and waste more time or can we go find this fucker so I can give him hell for worrying you?”

Iason almost sighed. “Very well, let us go then. I will contact Raoul on the way.”

“Why?” Riki demanded as Cal closed the door behind them.

“He is also concerned and was the one who alerted me to the problem.”

“So, just tell him when we get Katze and come back.”

“We do not know what sort of situation we will find, Riki.” They took the elevator to Iason’s private garage and slid into one of his fastest cars. “It would be better to have back up.”

“You would have let him come and made me stay home?”

Iason keyed in his code and drove out of the garage. “Yes,” he returned without hesitation. “Because Raoul can take care of himself.”

“So can I!”

Iason reached across and grabbed the stubborn mongrel’s chin so that their gazes met. “I do not love Raoul. He does not belong to me and he is not Human and therefore fragile.”

Riki shrugged him off, slumped in the passenger seat and ignored the pleasure hearing Iason say he loved him caused. “I’m not fucking fragile.”

“Compared to an Elite, you are a marshmallow.”

Riki’s lips twitched in amusement but he shot Iason a sullen look. “What kind of marshmallow?”

“Toasted. Crusty on the inside and warm and gooey on the inside.” Iason slid the fingers of his free hand through Riki’s. “My favorite kind of marshmallow.”

Riki grunted and turned to look out his side window, but he did not pull his hand away from Iason's. "How you gonna find Katze, anyway?"

"His earring has a tracer."

Riki glanced sideways and sneered. "You really got an issue with boundaries don't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Do you put tracers on everyone you know?"

"Only those who are important to me."

"Does Raoul have a tracer?"

Iason smirked, jealousy was a fascinating emotion. "Not that I am aware of."

"Good." Riki shifted his body a little bit closer to Iason's. "So why do you have a tracer on Katze? Does he know?"

"Of course he does, and it is for practical purposes, in the event he found himself in a situation he could not deal with himself. I never believed I would have to use it."

"Yeah," Riki replied quietly. He was still having trouble with the idea that Katze could ever be in that kind of deep trouble, that guy seemed almost as untouchable as Iason sometimes. He glanced over and saw Iason's expression had turned impassive, a sure sign that the Blondie was worried. He squeezed Iason's hand until Iason looked at him. "He'll be okay. He's Katze."

Iason squeezed Riki's hand back and nodded.

Less than an hour later, the tracer showed that the black-market dealer was in just outside the Diedo district in Area Five.

“Why would he be there?” Raoul demanded. “Is this one of your deals gone bad, Iason?”

“I do not deal with anyone from Area Five, they are too fractured. If Katze is there he must have a reason.”

“Or someone took him there,” Riki commented from the back seat.

Initially, he had refused to give up the front passenger seat to Raoul who had cited he was a Blondie and therefore deserved to ride in front. Riki’s response was that Prince trumps Blondie so Raoul could get go find a throne and sit on it. Iason made the decision for Riki to sit in the back, simply to end the argument, and possibly because it annoyed Riki and he wanted to punish the mongrel for not staying home. Also, if it looked like trouble upon arrival at their destination, he could lock Riki in the car if he was in the back.

The tracker brought them to the entrance of an abandoned mine.

“No way he could be in here, right?” Riki asked as they stepped out, just as dawn started to break.

“I don’t understand why he would be, but this is where the tracer puts him.” Iason bent his body to get through the entrance and started into the mine. Riki and Raoul followed with the Blondies’ creating a soft blue light with their eyes so they could see in the darkness.

“If he is off sleeping at home or somewhere I will not be pleased!” Raoul grumbled.

“Didn’t you check his house before you called Iason?” Riki asked.

“Of course I did, but he was not there. I suspect that he has other locations and I have not been able to find them yet.”

Riki smirked at the idea that Katze could avoid the great and terrible Raoul so easily. “Maybe he just doesn’t want to see you.”

“It is *your* company that Katze avoids. I believe he used the term *needy*.”

“I’m not needy!”

“Enough!” Iason snapped, turning his gaze on both of them, before resuming the path ahead. Honestly, it was like babysitting a pair of toddlers. “I hear something, now be quiet.”

Both Raoul and Riki grew silent as they followed Iason further down into the mine. They came to a fork and Iason glanced at the instrument in his hand where a red dot blinked steadily.

“This way,” he said quietly and moved forward. In this shaft they had been doing construction, many of the walls had been reinforced and hulled out to provide wider access. He could hear the faint sound of air purifiers and realized that someone had built a base down here. The further they went the more the walls began to resemble regular building materials.

They turned a corner and two armed men suddenly shouted and ran towards them. They were easily dispatched and Iason indicated a door ahead.

“There.” Iason turned to Riki. “Stay here.”

“Fuck that,” Riki whispered back. “I didn’t come all the way here to hide!”

“Riki, you could get hurt!”

“Yes, Princeling,” Raoul hissed with a smirk. “Your hands might get dirty.”

Riki stuck up his third finger. “Fuck you and ...”

Iason’s hand quickly covered Riki’s mouth in warning. “We do not have time for this. If you want to come then do so, but allow Raoul and I to deal with anyone inside. Your job is to locate Katze, understood?” Riki nodded, because he couldn’t speak with Iason’s hand over his mouth. The Blondie pulled his hand away, then leaned down and firmly kissed Riki. “And if you let yourself get hurt I will punish you severely.”

Riki smirked. “Awww, I feel the love.”

Iason waved a firm finger at Riki, then flicked him on the forehead in warning, before he turned back to Raoul who was grinning triumphantly. Because of that, Iason smacked him across the head. “That goes double for you.”

Raoul continued to smile and rubbed his head as if the slap had actually done more than displace his hair. “Punish me if you wish but no kissing. I have boundaries.”

They burst into the room, and with their keen night vision spotted the group of men crowded around something on the floor. The men turned at the entrance of the Blondies and as they did, a huge form could be seen lying on the floor, and next to it, the naked, bruised and bloody body of Iason Mink’s black-market dealer.

Raoul moved forward and before he fully realized his actions had snapped the necks of two of the men who had rushed towards them. The other’s scattered, but they could not outrun a Blondie, and as Raoul surged to the left, Iason moved to the right. The men were incapacitated in seconds, the last one, was Heine who Iason had by the throat and was holding several feet off the floor

Riki had dropped next to Katze and turned him over. He spotted the familiar looking cigarette on the floor, no longer burning and recognized it instantly. “We’ve got to get him to...” His eyes widened as his gaze roamed over Katze’s naked body. “Uh...I...Iason?”

Iason glanced at Riki, his eyes still flashing red, but as they focused on what Riki was seeing, they softened to their regular blue. “Is he dead?”

Riki pulled his eyes away from Katze’s body and searched for a pulse. “I can’t tell.” He leaned down and could feel no breath coming from Katze’s mouth. “He’s not breathing. We have to get him to a rejuvenation chamber!”

“In a moment.” Iason looked back at the quivering Heine. “Who sent you to do this?”

“I...no body we...” Heine screamed as his left arm was torn away from his body at the shoulder joint, he felt piss slide down the inside of his leg. “Andoni! ANDONI! He screamed the name, over and over, and then started to sob. “Don’t kill me, please, don’t kill me.”

Iason stared at him in disgust. “No. I won’t kill you.” He let the man drop in a heap on the floor, and stepped over the larger unconscious form beside Riki. “What of that one?”

Riki checked for life signs on the larger man who had fallen close to Katze. “Dead.”

“Good.” He crouched beside Katze, detected no signs of life. “Why do you think he can be saved?”

“It’s a Black Moon cigarette.” Riki held up the remaining butt of the one he’d picked up off the floor. “He must have convinced them to let him have it.” Riki shook his head as he looked at the mangled mess that was a man he admired.

Raoul glowered down at Katze. “He must have been out of his mind with pain and yet he remained loyal to you, Iason.”

Iason detected a tone of something new in his brother’s voice, bitterness? Regret? “Yes.” He slipped out of his cloak and draped it over Katze’s naked form before taking the man in his arms.

“It works fast, Iason, real fast,” Riki insisted as he rose. “We have to get him into chamber, it’s what counteracted the poison in me after Dana Bhan.”

“They will not allow a Human to use the chambers in the medical centre,” Raoul stated, grimly. “I have one in my lab we can use, we will bring him there.”

“Yes.” Iason said again and was already moving to the door, he glanced over his shoulder to see his brother still lingered behind. “Raoul. Now!”

“Coming,” Raoul returned as the two rushed out. He stood over the blubbering Heine, then crouched down beside where Katze’s body had been. He touched a gloved finger to the dark stains on the floor, lifted it to his face and analyzed it instantly as blood and semen. Semen? His gaze darkened.

“Who raped him?” Raoul asked quietly as he slowly rose.

“P...Please...” Heine blubbered as he cradled his torn arm and glanced around at the littered bodies on the floor. His people had been decimated by the Blondies and he suddenly remembered the warning that the red-head had given. He started to shake. “We...we were just doing a job. We...”

“Are you in pain?” Heine sobbed, curled into himself and nodded. “Good.” Raoul crouched beside him, watched with satisfaction as Heine’s fear revitalized and the group leader pissed himself again as. Raoul wiped his glove, still wet with blood and semen across the man’s face. “Did you do this?”

Heine shook his head violently. “N...N...No.” He pointed to the dead man on the floor. “H...He did it. He did it!”

“On your order?”

“We...we had orders to get information. We were just doing a job!”

“A job you took very seriously,” Raoul stated as he rose to his full height and towered over the cowering man. “I take things seriously as well, especially when they involve attacks on my friends.”

“You promised,” Heine wailed pathetically. “You said you wouldn’t kill me!”

“No, that was my brother. We do look somewhat alike, I grant you, but I have made no such promise.”

“N...no. Please! Please! I didn’t mean...” Heine’s eyes and mouth widened as the large white boot came down upon him.

“Will he be okay?” Riki asked as Raoul connected the sensors to the chamber and activated it.

Raoul had given Katze a shot of Adrenalin as well as some other concoction, and then he and Iason had quickly washed and sterilized the body before it was placed in the rejuvenation chamber as a soft orange glow now surrounded him.

“I’ve started his heart again,” Raoul stated as he adjusted the chamber controls based on the information on his console screen. “We can only wait and see if the chamber can counteract the poison.”

“It did for me,” Riki acknowledged as he stared down at Katze.

His gaze drifted to the older man’s genitals, but he didn’t feel now was the time to speak about it. To say he had been shocked was an understatement, and he couldn’t help but wonder if it was worth bring Katze back if Iason was going to punish him. What was the punishment for something like this? Had it even happened before?

“Yes, but Katze’s body has sustained far more injuries than yours,” Raoul stated. “Counteracting the poison is only one step.”

“What are his injuries,” Iason demanded quietly. He was standing by the wall and not looking at the chamber but at Raoul’s collection of specimens.

“Do you want details or the condensed version?”

“All of it.”

“Very well.” Raoul made his final adjustment to the chamber and then pressed a button and a thin privacy shield slid over it so Katze could no longer be seen. “He has a broken nose, four broken ribs, a broken pelvis, his

right ankle has been shattered, not sure if that will heal.” Raoul paused as he saw Riki’s face pale, but Iason nodded at him so he continued. “Whatever they did to his back also ruptured his spleen, his left lung was punctured by the third rib breaking, the cornea in his left eye has ruptured.”

“All of it, Raoul,” Iason ordered when the Blondie stopped again.

“I do not see the point...”

Iason’s fist slammed onto a table, breaking it instantly. “All. Of. It. I want to know everything that was done to him, do you understand. I don’t care about his privacy or the superfluous delicacies. I want all of it.”

Raoul had never seen his friend this angry, well actually that was untrue. When Orphe had kidnapped Riki, Iason had also been enraged. “They are dead. I killed the last one myself.”

“No, the soldiers are dead, their leader is not and that I will take care of myself. Now, tell me the rest.”

Raoul again glanced at Riki and felt a tinge of sympathy at the sorrow on the younger man’s face. “He was raped, brutally and has anal tearing which also ruptured several blood vessels.”

Iason nodded then turned away. “Why would they rape him?”

“Because they could,” Riki muttered as his hands curled into fists. “Because it’s the worst humiliation.”

“No,” Iason decided. “Katze would not feel humiliation or shame with such an act.”

“I disagree with you. Katze was...” Raoul struggled with how much to say. “Dealing with some things that could have made this the worst possible punishment.”

Iason turned back to Raoul, his eyes narrowed. “Oh?”

“Do not ask me, I will not tell you. It is a confidence I have promised to him, Iason, and I will not break it.” Raoul glanced at the chamber. “Especially not now, when he still may die.”

“Whatever Katze was *dealing* with,” Iason repeated darkly. “He was Furniture and he would not be humiliated by such an act.”

“It’s true,” Riki realized. “Even in Ceres when you are trying to get information you hurt, beat and maim, but you don’t fuck the captive. It’s a line most people don’t cross.”

“So, they did it to send a message?” Raoul asked, curious. “What kind of message was this Andoni trying to send you?”

“Andoni Brasier isn’t behind this.” Iason denied. “He doesn’t have the balls to do something like this, especially if they even suspected that Katze was mine.” He walked over to the chamber and slid back the shield. “This was torture for the sake of torture, they already knew who Katze belonged to, perhaps not the men who were hurting him, but they needed a reason to do so. The person who sent them knew, I am sure of it.”

“Who but us knows that Katze works for you?” Riki asked.

“I will think on it.” Iason turned away. “Come Riki, the sun is almost up and we must prepare for our guests.”

“Guests?”

“The Eclipse party is tonight.”

Riki shook his head and looked at the chamber. “I’m not in the mood for a stupid party, Iason.”

“I understand, which is why we must continue with it.” Iason walked over and wrapped his arm around his lover. “Come, can manage a few more hours sleep if you are tired, and then we will prepare.”

“But...”

“I will look after Katze, Riki,” Raoul promised, for once using the mongrel’s actual name. “It could be days before we know anything for sure.”

Riki nodded then looked up at Iason. “I want a piece of it.”

“A piece of what?”

“Of whatever you’re gonna do to the person who did that to Katze. Whatever you find out you have to tell me. I want to know all of it too.”

Iason could see that this was not bravado, as it had been when they went in search of Katze and so he nodded. “You shall have it.” To Raoul he said. “Come by if you have a moment, if for nothing else to have some dinner.”

Raoul nodded. “I will try to.”

Riki turned back and for possibly the first time spoke to Raoul without animosity or sarcasm. “Don’t let him die, okay?”

“I will do my best.”

Riki nodded, knowing that would be enough, because despite his issues with the Blondie, Raoul’s best was really more than most could hope for.

Chapter 11

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and the others are spending time during the Eclipse- A little fun after two very hard chapters. Please review if you enjoy and thanks so much for all the others!

Carrie stared across the living room and out onto the balcony where Riki was curled on the ledge smoking. “Maybe we shouldn’t have done this today, Iason,” she murmured.

She had heard about the attack on Katze, and how he was now fighting for his very life in a rejuvenation chamber with a Blondie named Raoul watching over him. Iason had given her only a few details on what happened, but it was enough to understand why Riki would be distracted.

Iason glanced at his sullen lover. Riki had been angry that Iason had insisted they go home and leave Katze to Raoul’s care, but there was little they could do until Katze came out of the chamber anyway. Now, despite the fact that the Eclipse had officially started and the sky outside was the darkest of black, Riki had become moody and quiet.

“No, give him his time to sulk,” he decided. “He will get over it in a while. I apologize that this was not what we had initially intended.”

“It’s not your fault,” Carrie dismissed and sipped the tea that Cal had made her. “If we’re being honest I thought about cancelling anyway.”

Iason would not have blamed her, given the day she’d had yesterday. “I am pleased that you did not.”

She managed a small smile but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. It would have been easier to wallow at her own place and continue to cry and scream and go through all the anger and rage and pain that seeing Lane again had

brought up, but she found that in the end, she had not wanted to be alone. That in itself was a sure sign that things inside her were changing, because she was always alone, whether she wanted to be or not. This time she didn't have to be, and she chose to be around people who cared for her instead of letting habit and mistrust rule her life.

And yet, now that she was here, with Iason again, she could not help but ask. "Why did you do it? Why did you bring Lane here to see me?"

"You required closure in order to properly heal. It was the right decision. I do not regret it."

"You don't regret it?" Could he not see how devastated meeting Lane had been for her? Had he not held her in his arms and comforted her when she was so close to the edge? Carrie wasn't sure why, but she took offense his comment. "What do you know about healing?"

"I beg your pardon?" Iason asked, obviously surprised by the question.

"What do you know about Human suffering, Iason? You're a Blondie of Tanagura. Your life is perfect. Your home is perfect. You were *made* perfect, with a strong, nearly indestructible body and a clear, logical mind. Nothing in your world is about pain and suffering." Carrie realized she was crossing the line and going too far, but she was still so raw from yesterday to stop.

"Carrie," Iason frowned and set his drink on the table.

"You've never had someone hunt you down, slaughter your entire race just for a trophy! You've never been beaten and humiliated to the point where you'd become the animal they think you are. What has been taken from you, Iason? Has anyone ever taken anything or anyone from you that you even gave a shit about getting back or that you couldn't just replace for a few more credits?"

The minute her words were out she regretted them, because she already knew the answer. Riki was his one weakness. Riki was his all. She slumped back on the sofa and buried her face in her hands.

A moment later, Iason spoke. “We all must face demons, both internal and external and pain and suffering are not exclusive to Humanoids.”

His voice was calm, almost peaceful, and much closer to Carrie than she was expecting. Slowly she lifted her head and saw that he was seated beside her and speaking quietly, perhaps because he did not want Riki to overhear their conversation.

“I have had someone taken from me, on several occasions, and I have always retrieved him. While I admit that I have not known pain as you have, I have known suffering.”

“I...Iason, I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so, so sorry. I don’t even know why I said any of that.”

“You are in angry and rightly so. I do not mind listening to your complaints, Carrie, but I will not sit here and be accused of not understanding them. I have made it my life’s work to understand the Human equation. This is why I have an organic brain instead of a cybernetic one. So that I may feel, so I can understand. “And also so that he can rule and dominate over them, he added silently, but she didn’t need to know about that part of his programming.

“N...No. I know that, I do.”

He leaned even closer and Carrie felt a shiver go through her, fear or arousal, she wondered? He was a beautiful specimen after all.

“My life is not perfect and never has been. Before I found Riki, it was orderly, concise and routine. I wanted for nothing, in that you are correct, but that did not mean I did not want something more. I simply was unaware of that hidden desire until I met Riki. I can be hurt, I have been, and I do understand regret, even if I do not feel it. Regret changes nothing, so I choose to live with my choices.”

Carrie discretely glanced at Riki, then back at Iason and decided, since they were getting so personal, to ask the one question she had been wanting to.
“Do you still think of him as a pet?”

“Yes, but that does not diminish the other ways I think of him, that as my lover and my mate. You and Riki act as if being a pet is the most horrible and shameful role there is, when it is exactly the opposite.”

“How is that possible?”

“A pet is chosen by its Master, therefore a pet should feel proud of that fact. A pet is very well cared for, all of their needs are taken care of by their Master.”

“Their needs, but what about their desires?”

“Those too are taken care of. Anything they could want is provided.”

“I don’t mean their sexual desire, Iason, I mean their ingrained ones.” She again glanced at Riki. “Riki wanted freedom and equality, those are standard Human needs but it was something you would not give him.”

“He told you this?”

She nodded. Some of it Riki had confided in her the last time he had been at her place, they had both gotten horribly drunk and she’d had to call Iason to come get him. But she learned some interesting things in Riki’s ramblings and the rest she had figured out herself.

“Riki and I can never be equal, we are of two different minds and two different levels. Equality in a relationship is not important.”

“It is to him. It would be to me.”

“Only if you deem equality to mean sameness. Riki and I are no more similar than you and I are. We each have different strengths and weaknesses, and different ways of thinking. This alone proves that we can never be equal.”

“Yes, but you...”

“If you are speaking of equality to mean justice, then a crime must have been committed to require that justice, and there has not been one.”

“You don’t think keeping him as pet against his will isn’t a crime?”

“Not on Amoï, and Riki knows this, therefore he cannot claim an injustice.”

Okay, given where they lived and the rules here, yes Iason had a point. “What about his freedom then? You can’t shove that off to some other reason. Riki wanted to be freed. And you refused.”

“Riki had been freed, he just chose to disguise and disbelieve it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When I made Riki my pet he was freed from the misery of Ceres where he often went hungry, probably froze in winter and had to sell his body to get even the most basic requirements of survival. With me, he had food and clothing and a warm place to sleep every day. All of his needs were seen to, and if there was something he wanted to eat or buy or experience, I would have provided it for him, but he could not allow himself to see any of that. Instead, he chose pride over logic, resistance over submission because he did not believe he deserved any of the things I offered him.”

“Wait, you’re saying that Riki just didn’t know what was good for him so he acted out because he didn’t know better?”

“No, I am saying that he could not see how much better his life with me was, compared to his life in Ceres. If he truly wished to keep his life as it was, he would have never tried to get a job outside of Ceres. If he had been content with who he was and how he was living. He would never have sought me out. But he did seek me out, because he wanted more, desired better, but once he had it he was too much of a proud mongrel to admit to that desire.”

“I think Riki sees it differently.”

“Of course he does, because he bases his choices on his emotions instead of logic. Logically a dog knows when it should come in from the rain, but emotionally it will stay there hoping for someone to feed it, until it catches

its death and dies from exposure or gets attacked by another animal and dies from its wounds.”

“I don’t think Riki would like you comparing him to a dog.”

“I am using Human references, so you can only blame yourselves for them.”

Carrie smirked, then glanced back at Riki. “He does seem happier lately.” She looked back at Iason. “And I know how much you love him.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry for what I said before. I don’t even know where any of that came from.”

“From your heart,” Iason replied simply. “I do not have one of those, so we can agree that I cannot understand how having one feels.”

“I think you do have a heart.” She shyly put her hand to his chest. “It may not be visible, and I can’t hear it beating, but it’s in there.”

“Thank you, Carrie. I am glad you came.”

“Me too,” she admitted and then sat back to put some distance between them.

Iason was too damn gorgeous for his own good and he smelled fantastic! She hadn’t been horny in, well, forever, because of her hang ups over what had happened to her in the past. Maybe Iason had been right and confronting Lane had been good for her if she could feel like this again.

“Is he dead?”

“No,” Iason replied, knowing who she was referring to.

“Really?”

“Really.” He probably would be dead soon though, Iason thought, but not by his hand.

She met his gaze squarely. “So where is he?”

“Far away where he can never hurt you again.”

“But not dead?”

“Not dead.”

“Then how do you know he won’t come back to hurt me?”

“You must learn to trust me, Carrie.”

Carrie nodded, then wet her lips as she broached her next question. “Is he...” She swallowed her suddenly dry mouth. “Will he suffer?”

“Oh yes.” Iason watched her close her eyes and release the breath she had been holding. Had he made a mistake in telling her that? Would she now feel that useless Human guilt again for such an unworthy man?

“Good,” she whispered quietly after a long moment and pulled her arms in to rub her arms. “Good.”

Iason lightly dropped his gloved hand onto her head, patted it. “Indeed.”

She managed a watery laugh and watched him return to the other sofa. Clearing her throat and discretely wiping her eyes she quickly changed the subject. “Whatever Cal is cooking in the kitchen smells fantastic.”

“I am sure it will be delicious.” Iason rose and returned to his seat opposite her. “He was excited that we would be having company, so I believe he may have gone overboard.”

“Will Raoul be joining us at all?”

“He may drop by later, once Katze has stabilized, but that could take a few hours or a few days. His injuries were extensive. Luckily, Riki made the

right choice in getting him into the chamber right away to counteract the poison. If not for that nothing else we did could have helped.”

Having been subjected to torture and beatings, Carrie knew that Katze had a long road ahead of him. They might be able to heal his body, but his mind and heart would take more time. She may ask to help with that, having been in that situation herself.

She sighed a little and realized that while she had finally found a tribe of her own, each of them were damaged in some way. But that was okay. What was that saying, misery loves company? Perhaps only a damaged, nearly lost, soul would have been able to reach her.

She studied Iason sipping his drink and pretending not to glance at Riki every few minutes. Riki’s damage was obvious, as was Cal’s recent trauma, now Iason, his was more complicated. He was an Elite, *The Blondie* of Tanagura and one of the richest and most powerful beings in this part of the galaxy, yet he knew very little about Human relationships. He could understand Human emotions, to an extent, but the actual physical and emotional aspects of a relationship seemed lost on him.

He could be anyone he wished, have anything he wished, except friends. He did not seem know how to be or have a friend or a lover, but he was learning, she truly believed that he was trying his best to be a good mate for Riki. Iason was anything but perfect, she regretted ever saying that, but he knew his flaws and worked hard to correct them. She had thought he was a cold, heartless and cruel machine when she first met him, but he had slowly changed her perception of him, and she was grateful for it.

Iason appeared to cling to what he knew, and when what he knew didn’t work for him, he reevaluated. She didn’t think any other Elite would have the courage to question himself that way, let alone take actions to correct something he did not like. Iason was so used to having and taking that he didn’t understand what it was to receive or to give. But he was learning, through Riki and she supposed her as well, he was learning to be a more rounded individual. So not perfect, just damaged, like the rest of them.

“You are looking very thoughtful.” Iason pondered. “Are you going on the attack again?”

“When did you know you loved Riki?”

Iason’s eyebrow rose. No one had ever asked him that. “I’m not sure, actually. I suspected it for some time, as it seemed the only answer for the new feelings that I had developed towards him, but there were still doubts.” He watched Riki as the mongrel finally doused his cigarette and dropped down off the barrier to come back inside. “Isn’t it odd? I cannot recall the exact moment those doubts disappeared.”

Carrie smiled. “Kinda like you woke up one day and just knew?”

“Something like that, yes.” Iason nodded as Riki started to drop down on the other end of the sofa. He reached out and pulled his lover closer so they were sitting beside each other. “Whenever it was, I have been sure ever since.”

“Sure of what?” Riki asked as he grabbed a pillow, tossed it in Iason’s lap and then laid his head upon it, stretching his legs out on the sofa.

“How long you would sulk.”

“I’m not sulking.” Riki played with the ID bracelet that Iason had given him and glanced at Carrie. “I’m not sulking, but I’m sorry if I’m ruining the party.”

“It’s been an eventful day,” she dismissed. “You don’t have to entertain me, so just feel what you want to feel. It’s okay.”

Riki turned onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. “I’m sure he’ll be fine. I mean, me and Iason were practically dead and the chamber helped us.” He looked up at Iason. “Right?”

“Exactly so,” Iason agreed as he caressed Riki’s hair. “He’ll be pleased you’re worried about him, I think.”

“I’m not worried.” Riki went back to playing with his bracelet. “Yeah, he’ll be fine. He’s Katze. He’ll be fine.”

Carrie exchanged a quiet look with Iason, and wondered if Riki could even hear the concern in his own voice. “You know what this party needs?” she decided and rose suddenly causing both her hosts to look at her. “Twister.”

“Who her?” Riki asked, scowling.

“Twister. It’s an old Earth game that they still play on New Earth and I just happen to have the board in my bag.”

She dashed up the stairs to where Cal had brought her small overnight bag and rummaged through it for a computer disc. It wasn’t an official Twister board, those were rare, so she’d decided to design a holo program similar to it and based on her Earth memories. She started back down and spotted Yielo hovering on the landing.

“There you are, come on, we’re going to play a game.”

“Oh no, I believe I should stay up here.” Yielo was still upset that she would be going home in a couple of days and had taken to staying out of Riki’s way, desperately hoping that if she didn’t make a nuisance of herself he might change his mind and let her stay. “But thank you.”

“Oh, horseshit.” Carrie stalked back up the stairs and grabbed her arm. “Come and play the game, no one gets to sit out of Twister.”

“Twist who?” Yielo started as she was pulled down the stairs.

They returned to the living area.

“You have a holo-terminal don’t you?” Carrie asked Iason.

“Of course. Cal!”

Cal appeared with a tray of snacks. “Yes, Sir?”

“Bring the portable holo would you?”

Cal nodded and walked off, returning a moment later to set up the small device on a nearby table. When he turned to leave, Carrie called to him.

“Get back here! You’re playing too!”

Cal merely blinked as she slid her disc into the projector, adjusted the lens so it would show on the floor and then waved at Riki as she grabbed the end of the coffee table. “We have to move this, we’ll need more room.”

“What is it we’re playing again?” he asked as he helped her move the table.

“It’s called Twister.” She pointed at Iason. “Can you push that sofa back?”

Iason rose and did so one handed. Intrigued, he picked up his wine again and sipped it as he stood watching them shuffle furniture around until there was a wide-open space in the living-room. Carrie gave a quick run through of the rules, and then pressed the remote on the projector. The floor exploded with different spots of colour. She gave everyone a number, one through five and told them that the program would tell them which limb to move and on which colour based on their number, when their turn came. The program began and in no time at all they were a mass of twisted, pretzel-like limbs and bodies.

“This is more difficult than I had imagined!” Yielia admitted as she tried to reach her right hand around Carrie’s leg to reach the yellow circle on the other side of it.

“But fun!” Carrie smiled as she was ordered to place her left foot on a blue square, which left her almost in a split position with Yielia nearly wrapped around one her right leg and her left between Iason’s legs and nearly touching his right shoulder, as he bent from the waist to reach his colours.

“That better not be your hand again, Iason!” Riki barked as he felt something land on his ass.

“S...Sorry!” Cal squeaked as he quickly snatched his hand back from the only available bracer he could find to keep from falling over in his currently absurd position. The minute he let go, he overbalanced and grabbed for

something to break his fall. Carrie's shirt was yanked hard, and she in turn grabbed for the closest thing to her, which was Yielo's arm. All three started to slide and as Riki was stuck between the three of them, all four crumpled in a wild heap of legs and arms.

"Oh, was that supposed to happen?" Iason asked, having easily out maneuvered the desperately flailing hands and feet while still keep his awkward position. He looked at Carrie through his very long legs. "Does this mean I win?"

Carrie cracked up, then it spread to Riki, Yielo and even Cal tittered delicately as he detangled himself, rose and then offered a hand to Yielo.

"This was amusing." Iason decided as he straightened, sensing the game had ended. "Shall we play again?"

Riki grabbed Iason's right hand even as the Blondie extended his left hand to Carrie and pulled both of them up off the floor. "You just want to grope me some more."

"I groped only in the interest of steadyng myself, Riki."

"Bull fucking shit. You could balance on just your dick in the middle of a sand storm and not budge an inch!"

"Ahhhh!" Carrie cried out, covering her eyes even as the vision of Riki's description assailed her and she dropped back to the floor. "I've gone blind!"

Iason immediately crouched down beside her, concerned. "Have you really?"

She pulled her hands away, grinned and tried to shove him over, but even from a crouched position he was solid as a rock. "Riki's right, you're a beast!" She stood up and shook her head. "No more twister, you have an unfair advantage."

"Of course I do, I'm a Blondie."

“What else can we play?” Riki asked, getting into the spirit. He was having more fun than he had expected to. “Pool?”

“Nah, that’s boring. How about truth or dare?”

“Truth or dare? What’s that?”

Carrie briefly explained the rules.

“Okay, I dare Iason to balance on his dick!” Riki cried and then slapped at his knees in laughter.

“Should be easy enough,” Iason said too delighted with Riki’s laughter to admonish him. “As I’ve had so much practice balancing you...” Riki’s hand slapped over his mouth and he stopped laughing.

“Shut up!”

“Why? I was simply making a point and...” Iason tilted his head as he watched Carrie bend from the waist in front of him, trying to stretch out the kinks in her body from the game. “Ass.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“What?” Riki demanded, confused by the sudden outburst.

“I am a Blondie of Tanagura,” Iason stated, but he was looking at Carrie. “I have the right to look at your ass or anyone’s, anytime I choose.”

“*What?*” Riki gasped as Carrie gaped at Iason then burst out laughing again.

“Has that been digging at you all this time?” she giggled.

“Yes!” But only because he had essentially lost the argument, something he rarely did. When Carrie dropped back to the floor and started to laugh harder he scowled. “Do you refute my claim?”

“Claim?” Riki demanded turning to Iason. “What fucking claim? And what are you doing looking at her ass?” Or any woman’s ass, he added silently.

He never imagined that Iason felt even a speck of desire for a female! Had the pets before him been female? Was he just a whim for Iason?

Iason blinked, surprised by Riki's anger. "It was all that was in my viewpoint during our embrace."

"Embrace! What the fuck were you doing in a fucking embrace?"

Carrie quickly sobered and sat up. "Riki, no, it wasn't..." she began but noticed that a wide smile had broke out across Iason's face.

"Riki! You are jealous!" Iason declared with delight.

Riki opened his mouth to protest, but was suddenly pulled against the Blondie and his mouth captured in a toe curling, hard-on aching kiss. He tried to push away, but he had neither the strength nor the will once Iason's tongue entered his mouth. Fine, fucking kiss me all you want, you bastard, but I'm gonna let you have it when you stop!

When Iason finally let his lover breathe, Riki shoved away and swung at him. Iason caught the young man's wrist easily and hauled him forward again, this time to land a heavy, smart slap across Riki's bottom.

"Ow! Fucker!"

Iason ignored Riki's ranting and struggles and pulled him back up to hold him close. "You have made me so happy," he stated quietly and felt all the fight go out of his mate,

"I'm not jealous," Riki muttered even as his head tipped sideways on the Blondie's shoulder. "I'm mad."

Iason caressed Riki's hair. "Because you are jealous."

"No!" Yes! "Because you threaten to kill anyone who looks sideways at me, but you go out and start fucking hugging people and looking at some woman's ass!"

"Hey!" Carrie shot to her feet.

“It was not some woman, it was only Carrie.”

“Hey!” she said again, this time in her own defense, but her indignation was immediately squashed by the way the two men were looking at each other.

Watching their interaction had pulled her in two different directions. She felt sympathy for Riki who was always overpowered by Iason, regardless of what he did, but she also felt a little joy at the way the Blondie was reveling in the reason for Riki’s behavior. And that kiss had made her insides burn like a dormant Volcano ready to explode lava all over the damn place. She hadn’t even known she could feel like that anymore, but anyone would be hard pressed not to get hot and bothered by the two handsome men before her in such an openly passionate pose.

“It’s fine, Riki.” Iason pulled back to look Riki in the eye, ignoring Carrie’s indignant outburst. “We both agreed your ass was the best.”

“What!” Riki started to push away again, horrified, but Iason held firm and started to laugh. “Let me go you, prick!”

Sensing another uprising, Carrie quickly interceded. “It wasn’t a romantic embrace, Riki,” she assured. “It was...” She tried to think of the best way to make him understand without revealing the incident with Lane. There was no point in staining Riki with that bastard. “I was overwhelmed again and you know how I get.”

Riki stilled and let Iason pull him fully into his embrace, even though his gaze remained on Carrie beside them. “Were you sad?”

His voice was suddenly so soft with concern that she almost sighed. For a man who claimed to only care about himself, he had the biggest, most generous heart of anyone she had ever met. “I was, and worried, and then I was happy again.” She met Iason’s gaze behind Riki’s. “Because I received something I hadn’t expected.”

“What was that?”

“A new start.” Suddenly uncomfortable at the way they were looking at her, and feeling exposed by all she had admitted, she turned and grabbed Cal by the arm. “Is dinner coming soon or will you let me raid your kitchen?”

“Dinner is ready whenever everyone wishes to eat,” he admitted.

“Great, I’ll help you get it ready.”

“Oh, I don’t need...” Cal started but was already being propelled towards the kitchen.

“Yielo!” Carrie barked. “You too, girl.”

Yielo glanced at her Maku, still in the arms of Iason Mink, sighed and quietly followed them out.

Chapter 12

Summary for the Chapter:

Guy finally meet the locals

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so very much for the support and all the wonderful reviews. I know you are worried about Katze, but don't worry you will hear about him soon. I hope you enjoy this chapter as well, I had fun writing it!

Guy woke up on the bed in their new hut, to the sound of voices. He turned his head sideway sand saw Shiao speaking to a hooded figure. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but he had a feeling that Shiao was irritated; not that the Onyx ever usually showed such emotion.

He winced as he sat up and swung his feet to the floor, Shiao and his visitor turned towards him, but Shiao also quickly moved to his side.

“Easy,” the Onyx warned as. “You may feel slightly nauseous after your ordeal.”

“Yeah, about that.” Guy glanced back at the hooded man and noticed that he wore leather bindings on his arms and legs and a wrap around cloak that opened at the sides to allow arm movement. Gloves covered his hands, boots his feet and a painted mask hid his face. “What the hell happened?”

“What happened is you foolishly went to low ground when I specifically told you not to.”

Guy's eyes narrowed on Shiao. He knew the Elite would be angry, but at the same time, Guy wasn't a pet and wouldn't be 'told' what to do, not even by Shiao. His brief battle with survival had finally helped him to remember the mongrel pride that he had denied himself after what he had done to Riki. No one was going to take that from him again.

"Yeah, you told me, but I was bored and going out of my mind waiting around, so I went to look for myself."

"But why? I did not lie..."

"No, you told me the absolute truth, but I was starting to feel like a prisoner, Shiao. You're gone all day, sometimes well into the night, and you expect me to just sit here with my thumbs up my ass and wait. It's been months!"

"No it has not. I explained that the days..."

Guy grabbed Shiao by the front of his tunic and growled. "Don't fucking quote semantics. It's been months to me, I don't give a shit how often the sun or moon rotates, to my mind and body it's been months!"

Shiao covered Guy's hand with his much larger one so their hands were flat against is chest instead of clutching his shirt. "I was simply trying to protect you."

"You *know* I'm not a patient person!"

Shiao smirked and nodded. "I do, and I am sorry for making you wait." He suddenly pulled Guy into his arms. "You had me so worried when I returned and found you gone. You could have died, so many ways and in so many times and I would have had no idea how to find you."

Guy let his anger fade and laid his head on Shiao's shoulder. "I know, and for that I will apologize, but I can take care of myself. I *did* take care of myself." He lifted his head and met the Onyx's gaze. "I killed a huge mother-fucking rat, man!"

Shiao nodded and glanced at their visitor. "So I have been informed."

“Informed?” Guy followed Shiao’s gaze and eyed the man suspiciously.
“Spying, were ya?”

“Guy,” Shiao warned mildly. “This is Shu’grth, he is the leader of the people here and the one who I have been speaking with all this time to confirm us staying here.”

Guy eyed the ugly, almost bestial mask on the native’s face, and was reminded of what he saw just before he lost consciousness. He bolted to his feet, angrily. “You! Was it you that attacked me?”

“Guy!” Shiao insisted, also rising but Guy was already pointing an accusing finger toward the unknown person and turning to Shiao.

“He hit me or something, spit at me with something and I went out. He tried to kill me!”

“If we wished you dead you would be,” came a shivering deep voice from behind the mask in nearly perfect Amoinian.

“Is that a threat?” Guy took a step towards the stranger, even as Shiao caught his arm and pulled him back. “You think you can take me on, then let’s go!”

“Guy! Stop this!” Shiao demanded. “You were not attacked, but saved.”

“Saved from what? I was doing fine! I was almost to the trees and...”

“The storm was nearly upon you and you would not have been able to climb to safety from where you were.”

“How do you know?”

“They told me.”

“And you just believe them over me?”

“Yes! Because they saved you and brought you back to me.” Shiao gripped Guy’s shoulders, forced him to stand still and face him as he relived the

moment of pure terror when he returned home to find Guy gone and only a few moments later, was informed by the native leader that Guy had been spotted on the ground. “The storms here are terribly dangerous, Guy.”

Guy snorted. “What isn’t dangerous here, for fuck’s sake?”

“Point taken,” Shiapo acknowledged. “However, more to my point. Lightening strikes the ground in a pattern of ten and is then followed by some sort of energy shock wave. The creatures below ground have tunnels deep beneath the ground to protect them, and the others flock to the trees to avoid it. If you are on the ground during a storm you would have little to no chance of survival.”

Guy tried to comprehend what Shiao was telling him. He’d had a sense the storm was dangerous, which was why he had been running to the trees, but then someone knocked him down and then out. “We were still on the ground,” he stated as he recalled the memory. “I hadn’t made it to the trees and someone knocked me to the ground. If they were trying to save me, why do that? Why trap us both where it’s the most dangerous?”

“It was to save your life.” Shu’grth stepped forward and then spread his dark over- cloak, which Guy had originally thought was leather but it seemed heavier, more solid than leather. “Our cloaks deflect the sky fire. They provide a barrier between us, the ground and the sky fire.”

“Yes. The one who knocked you down did it so that their cloak could protect you both from the lightening, Guy.” Shiao agreed. “They were not trying to injure you.”

“Oh.” Guy shifted on his heels. “Well, he didn’t have to put me out. He could have just told me he was trying to help...” He remembered how he had struggled and begrudgingly realized the native probably had no choice but to do what he did. He turned toward Shu’grth, unnerved that he couldn’t even see the creature’s eyes because of the weird mask. “Fine, so, I guess I owe you then.”

“Owe?” Shu’grth asked.

“Yeah, you did me a solid so now I owe you. What do you want?”

Guy really hoped the guy didn’t pick sex, not only because he had become selective about who he did it with, but also because this guy was from an alien race and who knew what they looked like under their clothes. They could have hidden tentacles or something weird like that. Actually, the tentacles might not be too bad depending on how they were used, and as long as they weren’t slimy. Holy shit! What the hell was he even thinking something like that for?

“The action taken was reasonable by our laws. There is nothing more to be done.”

“Guy is a mongrel from Ceres,” Shiao explained, understanding the mongrel wouldn’t feel easy just letting it go. “In his culture, when someone does something advantageous for you, you deserve compensation. He is asking what compensation you would require for saving his life.”

“A strange custom. How can one repay the value of a life?”

“Look, I know I don’t have a lot, but I’m sure we can work something out, so just tell me what you want. I can do something for you, like an errand or work or something, or you can take...” He glanced around their meager belongings in the room. “Whatever in here that’s mine for yourself.”

“Do I understand that you wish to offer material goods or your services for this compensation?”

“Yeah, sure.” What else did he have to offer?

Shu’grth took a few moments to digest this information, then said. “It was my Kisjat who saved you.” He moved to the door and spoke in his own language.

“Kiss that what? Sorry, what’s he want me to kiss?” Guy whispered to Shiao, confused.

“Not kiss, Kisjat, his off spring or child.”

“Oh...okay.”

A moment later another creature, dressed almost identically to Shu’grth, and just as tall and lean, stepped inside and Guy immediately noticed the only difference was in the masks and the gloves. “This is Thu’grth, my Kisjat.” The two spoke back and forth, with the younger one occasionally turning his head towards Guy.

Finally, Thu’grth nodded and pointed to Guy’s mechanical arm. “My Kisjat requests your arm. It is strong and powerful and interesting to him as it appears different from your flesh.”

“My arm?” Guy placed a hand protectively on his mechanical arm. He didn’t really want to have to go around a place where they had to live in trees and swing on vines with just one arm, he’d never be able to leave the damn house!

“That is not possible,” Shiao began. “He requires his arm to...”

“It’s fine,” Guy interrupted quietly. A deal was a deal and he really had nothing else to offer them, unless they didn’t realize that sex was an option. Uneasily, he decided to put all his cards on the table, to see if he could save his arm at least. “Unless you, you know, want option B.”

Shu’grth tilted his head. “What is this option B?”

“Sex. I can have sex with you, or him...him with me, and we’d call it even. Or if he just wants a blow job I’m damn good at that, but I’d have to do it at least four or five times for what I owe you and...”

Shiao’s gloved hand slid over Guy’s mouth as the two natives stepped back, either confused or appalled. “It is their way,” he stated calmly. “Ceres is a very poor place, so they trade things, including themselves, to get what they need. Mating with another is more a transaction or trade for mongrels than a personal relationship.”

“Trade we understand,” Shu’grth nodded. “Trading of one’s body, that is against our laws.” He spoke to Thu’grth again and the native nodded once

more. “Your arm will suffice.”

“I must protest,” Shiao began but Guy put a hand on his chest.

“No, it’s okay. A deal’s a deal.”

“Guy...”

“It’s fine, really. I did okay with just the one arm before. You can detach it right?” The first arm that Shiao had gotten for Guy came off too easily, so this model was actually fused into his shoulder.

Shiao caressed Guy’s shoulder, gently. “It may scar.”

“It’s fine, what’s one more?”

“It is decided,” Shu’grth nodded. “We will go to the mounds.”

What the hell were the mounds, their word for clinic? Guy looked up at Shiao again, who seemed unable to answer the unspoken question.

“The Human will ride on Thu’grth’s back, as we must go quickly.”

“No,” Shiao denied. “I will carry him.”

“Look, “Guy protested. “I can carry myself...” He broke off as Shiao turned his back to him and crouched. “This is stupid! I haven’t had a piggy back ride since I was a kid!”

The memory of his and Riki’s first meeting crept into his mind, but he noticed it did not hold the usual sting of pain and regrets he had come to associate with such thoughts. He’d been thirteen and still trying to figure out how things worked outside of Guardian. Some older boys decided they wanted a play toy and he was chosen. It was Riki who found him afterwards and carried him, on his back, to the small hovel that Riki had carved out for himself in the slums. Riki treated his injuries as someone who was used to treating himself, and Guy had fallen in love with the dark mongrel then and there.

“Please, Guy,” Shiao requested quietly. “They travel through the trees too fast for you to keep up, and I will not risk further injury for you.”

“This is stupid!” Guy exclaimed but he climbed onto Shiao’s back anyway.

Shiao cupped his hands around Guy’s legs and rose as if he had no more than a feather on his back, instead of a one hundred sixty-pound mongrel. He followed the natives outside and watched them immediately start jumping through the massive, wide branches. With a sigh, the Onyx leapt after them.

Guy was grateful to be on Shiao’s back once they really started moving, because the speed of the passing trees and scenery actually made him nearly ill. He couldn’t focus, couldn’t gather himself so he just shut his eyes and tried not to think about how fast they were going and how high up they were.

Finally, they stopped and he opened his eyes as Shiao gently set him on the ground, or what felt like ground, but as Guy looked around he saw they were on a giant, flat topped mound, surrounded by hundreds of similar, smaller mounds. Shu’grth must have called to his people because Guy watched many masked natives leap to and from the mounds until they were all gathered on the mounds closest to the largest mound.

“What’s going on? he whispered to Shiao as he found himself the subject of dozens of the most hideous masks he had ever seen.

“I am unsure.” Shiao stepped forward to speak with Shu’grth, but the leader was raising his hands and speaking to his people, all of who called back an encouraging, yet guttural reply. He turned to Shiao and Guy. “Here it shall be decided, as is our way.”

“What will be decided?” Shiao demanded, liking the situation less and less. He had known Shu’grth for a long time, and had known the Chief’s father and grandfather before that, but this was something he was not aware of and he could not trust implicitly even one whom he considered an old friend, when it came to Guy.

“Thu’grth saved the Human’s life, but the Human claims injury. The Human has offered his arm as the prize, now my Kisjat must earn the right of possession.”

There was more cheering, or maybe they were jeering, Guy really couldn’t be sure. “Wait, hold it. He already has earned it, because he saved my life. Isn’t that what you said he did? Protected me?”

“You claimed injury, therefore Thu’grth must defend the honor to receive your compensation.”

“In what way must he do this?” Shiao inquired even as someone stepped up behind Guy and pulled his real arm back behind him. “What are you doing?”

Guy was already shoving the native away, but Shu’grth placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“This is our way. You will fight for your individual honor.”

Guy was too confused by the conversation to prevent his hand being tied behind him with a colourful scarf. “Look, I take back what I said before.”

“Are you Chakjo, Human?”

“What the fuck is Chakjo?”

“Coward,” Shiao returned quietly and then to Shu’grth added. “And he the farthest from such a thing.”

“Then we shall begin.” Shu’grth nodded and slapped a heavy dagger into Guy’s hand. He lifted his hands again and called out to his people in their language which resulted in more strange sounding cheers.

“No!” Shiao stepped in front of Guy. “I will not allow this. We came here to ask for your aid, not to enter into a physical tournament!”

“You said he was not Chakjo,” Shu’grth returned. “Is he Mustan then?”

“Fuck you!” Guy had no idea what the new word meant but he didn’t like the sound of it. His mongrel pride almost leapt into his throat as he stepped out from behind Shiao. “You want me to fight, fine, but you’ve tied the wrong arm asshole.” He wiggled the fingers of his free hand. “This is the strong arm. The fight won’t be even.”

“Thu’grth is skilled at fighting and stronger than you will be,” Shu’grth stated. “Using your alloyed arm will compensate you for your weakness.”

“I’m not weak!” Guy noticed that Thu’grth had also been given a dagger and allowed only one free arm. “Okay, so if I win I keep my arm and we call it square. If he wins, I give up my arm, right?” The idea that he had a chance to keep the arm as an appealing one, so he’d kick this kid’s ass and maybe earn some points with the natives then. Not too hard, right?

“Guy, I do not believe...” Shiao began.

“It’s fine. Fighting is something I know.” He seared Shiao with a bold look. “No interference, you get me?”

“I will not agree to that!”

“I can do this! You’ve never really seen me fight, but I’m good at it.” He smirked. “Come on, have a little faith. This will be a piece of cake.” Especially if he was using his metallic arm.

Two of the natives tried to pull Shiao back from the center of the mound but he remained routed to the spot.

“It’s okay,” Guy assured. “I’ve got this.”

Reluctantly Shiao followed the men and leapt to the next closest mound, as Guy faced his opponent who was already in a fighting stance.

Once again Shu’grth lifted his arms and spoke in his language, then he stepped between the two fighters and dropped one arm. “To the death!”

Guy’s head whipped around in surprise, but Thu’grth was already attacking. He barely had the chance to dodge out of the way and it was more awkward

than he expected with one hand tied behind him. Having his arm bound threw off his balance, but after a few minutes of dodging the quick creature opposite him, he found a firmer stance.

He noticed that Shu'grth had also leapt to a nearby mound, leaving just the two of them circling each other. Thu'grth leapt forward and Guy brought his dagger up just in time to block the blade aimed at his heart. It felt weird, the heaviness of the metal, the sound of them clashing. On Amoï they only had vibro blades, which were far more lethal in his mind, but sometimes in the slums they would fashion a knife out of whatever material they found lying around. It still did not measure up to what he now held in his hand.

His opponent was impossibly fast, and he decided that it was only because of sparing so many years with Riki, who was equally quick, that he was managing to avoid injury. Of course, he couldn't land a blow on Thu'grth either, who also knew how to avoid an attack, and Shu'grth wasn't kidding when he said that his Kisjat was strong, even with one arm the creature was managing to force him back or shrug off Guy's hold far too easily.

The others around them were dead quiet now, so all Guy could hear were his own panting breath and grunts when he and Thu'grth grappled. The native made almost no sound of exertion whatsoever, which was intimidating. He couldn't wipe the sweat away from his eyes because he had to keep his one arm in a defensive blocking stance, and so when it rolled into his eyes and caused him to squint, that one instant was all it took for Thu'grth to disappear in front of him.

"What the..." He began, just as he was hit from behind, but Guy knew this kind of attack now.

Before he even hit the ground, he had flipped his body so that Thu'grth landed beneath him. He jabbed his elbow hard into the native's ribs and finally heard a grunt of pain, but two strong legs wrapped around him and he felt, more than saw, the prick of the dagger at his side. Guy pressed his feet into the ground and threw his head back, hearing a loud crack as he made contact with the person underneath him.

Thu'grth seemed more concerned that his mask had cracked than holding on to Guy, and so the mongrel struggled out of the hold and dove for the dagger he had dropped when he had been tackled, but even as he reached for it, his slide caused the weapon to tumble off the mound and he almost followed after it. That was when he noticed their additional audience. Rats, huge mother-stinking rats were circling the mound below, but seemed unable to climb it.

"Fuck me!" he exclaimed even as he heard a movement behind him.

He spun onto his back just as Thu'grth leapt. He brought his feet up to catch the native, then let his opponent's charge carry his legs up and forward over his head. A cry sounded but his hand was already snaking out to grab Thu'grth's ankle. The momentum of the native's downward fall almost carried Guy down as well, but the mongrel managed to dig his heals in and slow their descent.

Within seconds, however, his head and neck were already over the edge of the mound at an awkward angle, as he struggled to hold onto Thu'grth with his one free hand. He could feel something tear in the shoulder of his bound arm, but he did not let go, because he could see that Thu'grth was only three or four feet from where the rats could reach him.

"Let me go!" Thu'rth said in Guy's language, surprising the mongrel with a high-pitched voice.

So, the little shit could understand him. "Not the deal!" Guy grunted as he felt himself start to slide again and tried to use the knuckles of his bound hand to grip the ground beneath him, but of course it was no use.

"You win! Let me go and you win!"

Guy could hear the panic, the terror in Thu'grth's voice, countermanding what the native was saying. "Not..." He grunted and felt his shoulders clear the edge. He knew once they did he'd have no purchase at all and they would both be rat food. "Ah Fuck it! Shiao!"

Seconds later someone gripped his legs and started pulling him back onto the mound. Not until both Guy and Thu'grth were back on solid ground again did Shiao release the mongrel.

Thu'grth lay face down on the mound, panting as Shiao gathered Guy into his arms.

"Let me go, ya big baby." Guy shoved at the Onyx, which had the effect of pushing against a building. "I'm fine."

"I am not."

Guy realized that Shiao was trembling, physically shaking and he awkwardly patted the Onyx's back with his free hand. "It's okay."

"Why did you not call for me sooner?" Shiao had been terrified, trying to keep his promise to Guy of no interference, but had been about to take action just as Guy called to him. "We did not agree to such things. You know you cannot be so foolish with your life, Guy. You know I cannot be without you now, so never do such things again!"

Touched, and slightly embarrassed at the Onyx's admission since they had such a large audience. "I know. I'm sorry. Come on, get off me, this is embarrassing."

Reluctantly, Shiao released him and straightened, then watched Guy focus on the remaining dagger still on the mound. The mongrel reached for it, cut his arm free, then rolled towards Thu'grth. The native, seeing the attack, immediately raised his arm in defense.

"Oh, fuck off." Guy shoved the native sideways so he could cut the binding on Thu'grth's arm, then he accepted Shiao's hand and climbed to his feet. "I'm not gonna kill you, but I did win so I get to keep my arm."

Thu'grth sat up slowly, rubbed the arm that had been bound. A large crack had formed across the middle of his mask and he tried to cover it with his other hand. "I do not understand. Why did you not let me fall?"

“I told you, that wasn’t the deal. I kill you or you kill me, no rats. The rats weren’t part of the deal.” Which was the only reason he’d let himself call to Shiao for help. Guy reared back his arm and tossed the dagger off the mound. “Now, if you wanna continue this, fine, but we do it my way. No restrictions, no weapons, just barehanded. You and me, but first...” He turned to Shiao and very quietly informed him that his shoulder was dislocated.

“Oh Guy, shall I help you to put it back?”

“Why do you think I’m telling you for?” Guy hissed grumpily but smiled a little at Shiao’s concern. “Yes. Do it.”

“It will hurt.”

“It hurts now, just do it will ya?”

Shiao placed one hand in Guy’s mouth and wrenched the mongrel’s shoulder back into place. Guy, for his part managed not to scream, but he bit through Shiao’s glove and had a wave of dizziness assail him afterwards.

“Right,” he murmured, swaying a little until Shiao steadied him. He tried to shake off the sudden discomfort and in a louder voice said. “Right, we doing this or what?”

Shu’grth helped his Kisjat rise and the two spoke quietly. The leader turned to Guy. “It is done.”

“So, we’re even?”

“This was not about compensation, Human. This was about who you really are.”

“Huh?” Did that mean he was going to have to do something worse next time to try and keep his arm, Guy wondered?

“You will kill in defense, yet you will not murder. You will accept advantage, yet you abide by the original agreements. You have courage,

Human, and honor. All of these things are what is required for us to accept you here.”

“So, what? This was a test? It was never really to the death?”

Shu’grth shook his head. “It was not.”

“Are you nuts?” Guy demanded, angrily and stepped forward as he pointed at Thu’grth. “He almost died! Your kid almost died, you fucking idiot!” Not just from the rats but Guy had fully intended to kill if that was the deal. He suddenly felt quite nauseous.

“Guy, don’t...” Shiao warned but the mongrel was too incensed to stop.

“Do you have any idea how lucky you fucking are? Kids in Ceres are raised by machines and adults who don’t give a shit about us. We don’t have parents or family or the comforts of home and we have to fend for ourselves by the time we’re five! We trade our bodies just for food and warmth and you...you have a son, a family and you just throw him away, take this kind of risk for some fucking test!”

Everyone grew silent after Guy’s tirade as Shu’grth seemed only to study him.

“You have compassion as well,” Shu’grth reported in his deep voice. “This is good. This is very good.” When Guy opened his mouth to spew more accusations the leader stepped forward, put his hands on the mongrel’s shoulders and said a word in his own guttural language. Then to Guy, he said. “Welcome, Guy of Ceres, to our pride.”

“Your what?” Guy began, but Shu’grth suddenly thrust back his head and released a loud, ear-shattering roar. Guy stepped back, startled, into Shiao’s firm chest. “What are you...”

Suddenly the others were leaping onto the mound, adding their roars to that of their Chief’s, and one by one they moved to place a hand on Guy, his arms, his shoulders, his head, his legs, and then those that couldn’t reach him put their hands on those that could, until there was a circular chain of

people around him that spread almost the entire width of the massive mound.

“I don’t understand,” Guy whispered, both afraid and very much in awe of what was happening.

Shiao was still standing close behind him, his arms wrapped around Guy protectively, but as he turned his head he saw that they weren’t just touching him, they were also touching Shiao as well. All these hands on him, all these people touching him should have made him feel uncomfortable, afraid or claustrophobic, and yet he could feel an energy from them, a kinetic sort of tingling and he immediately felt...safe.

And then, Shu’grth pulled one hand away and lifted up his mask to reveal a decidedly feline, uncannily familiar face. “Welcome to the Pride of the Dakfure.”

Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

Our mystery villain has a conversation, and Iason discovers a frightening new skill.

Felix Andoni, a small man with a huge ego stormed into the semi-dark room and glared at the shadowed figure seated opposite him, like some King on a throne. He had never seen this guy's face, only the red of his eyes, and shadowed movements of a body he also couldn't quite discern. He hadn't liked this guy from the start, this creature people had named The Shadow and he always spoke in the plural; how creepy was that?

Lots of people chose to hide their identity in their business. Lots of deals happened in dark places, but there was something was off about anyone who kept themselves almost completely shadowed, at all time. Andoni couldn't even tell if the creature on the throne was Human, but the money had been good and he couldn't deny that the idea of breaking into a larger market had been appealing.

All they'd had to do was pick up this Black-Market dealer and rough him up to find out who he worked for. Wasn't so hard and he'd sent enough men to make sure there was no way this guy could escape. The dealer went by several different names, but in Area Five he was mostly known as Stone Cold, since nothing ever seemed to affect him and if you crossed him or tried to back out of a deal, you'd find yourself stone cold on the ground the next day.

It should have been a simple snatch and grab. Rough the guy up, get some information and then leave him to live or die from his injuries. No one should have been able to trace it back to him. No one should have been able to even find him!

"Is there a problem?" The Shadow inquired.

“You never told me this guy belonged to Iason Mink!” Andoni accused as he wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Does he? The prisoner confessed then?”

“Fuck no! I figured it out when two fucking Blondies broke into the place and killed every damn body! One of them was fucking Iason Mink.”

Sweat began to roll off Andoni as he remembered the terrifying footage he had watched on the security cameras they’d had inside the room. His guys had gone too far, way too far, but Heine was like that sometimes. Sometimes the guy just lost control, but then, when he watched Iason Mink break through the doors with some other Blondie and a dark kid he had almost shit himself.

“Well then, our contract is complete, isn’t it?”

“Are you crazy? Are you fucking nuts? This was Iason Mink! The biggest fucking crime lord in six sectors! He walked in and squashed my guys in seconds, fucking seconds was all it took!” And Heine, he thought in horror hadn’t been as lucky as the others, who had suffered broken necks, or internal bleeding from being thrown into a wall.

No, Heine had suffered almost as much as that poor bastard Stone Cold. The other Blondie with Mink seemed to have taken some kind of offense at what had been done to the Black Market dealer. There had been no audio, but holy shit. Iason mink had ripped Heine’s arm right out of the socket and looked like he had been about to strangle him, but the dark kid said something to him and he turned his attention to the dealer.

Then that other Blondie...Andoni shuddered. Heine had suffered like no one should have to suffer. That Blondie broke every single bone in Heine’s body, one by one, with either his foot or his fingers, and it all happened horrifically fast, within minutes, although he was sure that for Heine it felt much longer. Then, while Heine was still screaming in untold misery and pain, the Blondie stepped on Heine’s head, crushed his skull so flat that they couldn’t even scrape it off the floor.

“You gotta get me out of here! Off planet or something! If Mink finds out I’m behind this...” And he would. Andoni was almost positive that he had seen Heine scream his name before the Blondie started to torture him. “I can’t stay here! This was not part of our deal!”

“All transports on or off planet are shut down until the Eclipse ends.”

“Then do something! I don’t care how but you gotta get me out of here!”

The Shadow remained unnaturally still, his voice unerringly calm. “You fear for your life?”

“Damn right I do? I don’t want to end up like Heine!”

“So you wish to avoid a long, suffering death?”

“That’s what I’m saying! Do you not speak English? You gotta get me outta here before he finds me and does to me what he did to my guys.”

“Of course. We are happy to help you avoid such a punishment,” The Shadow advised. “Bean.”

Andoni started to turn but before he could a glowing blue blade poked through his chest. “W...what? What?” he began even as blood gurgled up his throat and spilled out through his lips.

“As you are so frightened of a slow death, we will give you a quick one.”

Andoni still had a question in his eyes as he fell forward onto the floor. Bean stepped around him and switched off the vibro-blade. He now wore a black tunic and slack set with a black jacket, so far removed from the outfit of Furniture that no one would ever recognize him as one.

The Shadow sat forward, red eyes gleaming. “How did that feel?”

“Good,” Bean admitted. “But not enough.”

“No, it isn’t is it.” The figure extended a gloved hand to his new pet. “Come.”

Bean dropped the knife and walked forward without hesitation until he was standing in front of his Master. “I need more.”

“Yes.” Gloved hands picked Bean up and settled him upon a wide, solid lap. “We need more and we will get it. This is just the start.”

Bean allowed himself to be stroked and petted, obeying whatever command his new Master gave him, because he knew it was the only way to get his revenge.

Carrie paused on the main dining platform and looked down into the living room. Riki had stretched out on the sofa, with his head on a cushion in Iason’s lap, and the Blondie idly caressed the sleeping mongrel’s hair. Iason had set up a fireplace hologram and one wall blazed with crackling wood and flames. This was what a family should be, she decided.

She stepped down into the living area and walked over to offer Iason one of the two cups in her hand. “Sleeping Beauty couldn’t make it any longer huh?”

Iason smiled and took the cup. “He had intended to stay up for the full Eclipse, but was out the moment he lay down.”

“Must be all that tender loving care he’s getting.”

“Thank you.”

Carrie chuckled at his response as she settled on the opposite sofa and curled her feet under her, before taking a sip of her coffee. “It’s been a busy few days.”

“It has, yes.” Iason took a sip of the coffee and his eyebrows rose. “This is delicious. What is in it?”

“It’s Irish Coffee, I picked up how to make it when I was on New Earth. It’s good for cool nights by a fire.”

“It is very good. I’ll have Cal add it to his repertoire. Has he retired for the evening?”

“Well, he’s in his room,” Carrie grinned, remembering Cal’s immediate obedience when Iason said they wouldn’t need anything else for the evening and he could go to bed. “But I’m betting he’s standing by the door waiting for you to call him out again.”

Iason shook his head. “No. Once I suggest he retire he knows he can go to sleep and I will not call for him unless it is urgent.” He stared down at Riki thoughtfully. “He isn’t really a Furniture anymore, I made that decision but it is very difficult remembering not to treat him as such, as he excels in the role.”

“I bet he’d love to hear that from you.”

“He is aware that I value him.”

“So you’ve told him?”

“He is aware,” Iason dismissed and eyed her pointedly, before relaxing his expression. “You are not yet tired?”

“No. Too much on my mind.”

“I can get you a soother if you like?”

She shook her head and lifted her coffee. “This is the only soother I need, if for nothing else to even out all the wine I had earlier.”

Iason smiled. “There is no shame in enjoying a good wine.”

“It is when you drink half a bottle.”

“A good wine should be drunk by the half bottle.”

She chuckled and glanced upwards. Iason had dimmed the shade of the field surrounding the condo so the ceiling became transparent. Stars twinkled above them like a thousand jewels in the sky. “I didn’t think I’d still be able to see stars during the Eclipse.”

“It is the sun that is blocked, not the sky and it is already evening again which is probably why you can see more than before.”

Carrie nodded closed her eyes for a moment then directed her gaze to Iason. “I want to ask you something. It’s something I need to know, and then we’ll never mention it again.”

“Very well.” Iason set his cup down and gave her his full attention.

“What exactly did you do to Lane?”

“Are you still worried? I told you he will not bother you ever again.”

“I know that and I believe that, but I...” She took a deep breath and tried to make him understand. “He was my first love, Iason. He was also my first real betrayal and the cause of most of my pain and suffering. I’m not asking because I am worried about him, I’m asking...” Another deep breath. “I’m asking because I came very close to tearing his throat out with my teeth and I would have felt not one single ounce of remorse from it. I need to know...I just need to know...”

“That he has been punished?” Iason asked softly, watching her struggle to admit to such a barbaric truth.

“You told me he suffered and I thought that would be enough, but it isn’t. It isn’t nearly enough.” She met his gaze again. “Maybe it makes me a monster too, but I need to know what you did. Exactly what you did.”

As they had already had a discussion on the truth of monsters, Iason did not challenge her claim or remind her that he was one of them. Instead, he said. “It was quite brutal. Are you sure you want the full details?”

She bit her lip, lowered her head, then lifted it again to meet his eyes. “All of it. I want to know all of it. I think I deserve that much.”

Such a brave soul, Iason thought. He had never believed a Human could have such pride and courage, until he had met Riki. Now he had met two very extraordinary specimens. He paused as he thought of Katze, well, perhaps three.

“Very well,” he said and gently covered Riki’s ears with his hands, just in case his lovely Prince woke during their conversation and calmly explained the torture he had subjected Lane DeBaur too. He then added that DeBaur was to be sold to a prison planet, where his body would be used sexually until he died or they killed him, but he was unsure if the transaction took place as Katze had been abducted. Either way, he doubted that Lane would be up to coming after Carrie regardless of where he currently was.

Carrie’s face had gone very pale, her lips pressed so hard together that they were nearly white.

“You are shocked. I am sorry, but you did request full disclosure.”

After a moment she managed to shake her head. “No,” she gasped as if she had never taken a breath before.

She quickly put her head between her legs and gulped in air that she hadn’t been aware she’d been denying herself. It wasn’t just holding her breath while Iason was speaking, this was the breath that she had been afraid to take, ashamed to take for years because of what had happened to her. This was the sweet, precious breath of freedom and release.

Iason had been right. She had denied it because she thought she had moved past it, or perhaps because she refused to trust it, but he had been right. It felt as if she had been an observer in the shell of her own body, as if she had been possessed by a demon who refused to allow her a solid night’s sleep or a moment of trust or contentment. Always worrying, always looking over her shoulder. Always pretending she was okay when she was far from it.

The weight that she had carried in her heart, for what seemed like forever, slowly eased. The incredibly painful tightness in her chest released and she suddenly felt like it was okay for her to be happy. Or sad, or angry or anything she wanted to feel. It was okay to start believing that she had a home, a home she could keep and people who love her.

“T...Thank you,” she whispered ever as tears streaked down her cheeks.
“It’s enough. It’s enough now.”

“If you are about to throw yourself at me again, please do so gently, as I do not wish to wake Riki.”

His simple statement made her laugh out loud and she quickly slapped her hand over her mouth as Riki started to stir, then settled back into sleep. “No, I’m okay,” she assured and wiped at her face with the back of her hands. She was suddenly so incredibly tired, and she knew that was part of her new liberation as well. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

“I wish you a good night sleep then.”

She nodded, rose and then walked over to stand before him. “Have you ever heard of the Wizard of Oz?” she whispered, because she was now much closer to Riki.

“A twentieth century children’s novel from Earth? Yes, I have read it.”

“Then you know who you are, don’t you?”

“I am not sure I understand.”

“You’re the Tin Man.” She leaned in and kissed Iason lightly on the lips.
“The one who doesn’t have a heart, but who offers more love than anyone.”

Touched, Iason smiled. “Do you know, you are only the second person to ever kiss me?”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It is true, no one else would dare.” He glanced down affectionately at Riki. “Riki was the first, though in all fairness I had to kiss him many, many times before he would willingly kiss me back.” He glanced up at her again, thoughtfully. “If I am a Tin Man, then you must be the wayward girl, Dorothy?”

“Nope.”

“No? Surely not the villain, a witch wasn’t it?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m the cowardly lion.”

“I disagree. You are not cowardly at all.”

“Maybe not anymore.” She glanced at Riki. “There *is* a Dorothy in our story though.”

“Riki? Why?”

“Because Dorothy starts off on a journey to find that which she already has. A place of her own, a family of her own and someone to love her. Just like Riki.”

“I’m not a girl.”

Iason and Carrie glanced down at the subject of their discussion, but it seemed Riki was talking in his sleep and not fully awake.

“Certainly not,” Carrie whispered, leaned down and kissed Riki’s cheek. Then straightened and whispered to Iason. “Good night, Tin Man.”

Iason chuckled and watched her disappear up the stairs to the guest room. He glanced down at his sleeping lover and smiled again. “Alone at last,” he said, then slid his arms under Riki, pulled him into his arms and rose. Riki’s arms coiled around Iason’s neck and he snuggled closer, but still remained asleep. “Such a sleepy boy.”

“Not my ass.”

Iason chuckled quietly and wondered what kind of dream Riki was having. He started up the stairs as he considered whether or not he would wake his beloved when they arrived at their bedroom. Riki had been lovely this evening, once he overcame his moodiness about Katze, and it as all Iason could do to not rip the mongrel's clothes off in front of everyone and fuck him senseless.

In the past he would have done just that, Iason realized. Well, perhaps not penetration, but he would have had no issue playing with Riki sexually in front of others. Just like Carrie's question about love, he wondered when that too had changed for him? When had he wanted to keep their sexual liaisons private from others? Riki had never liked being on display, but that had never been a concern for Iason before, or kept him from doing what he wanted.

"I am beginning to wonder exactly what you've done to..." A hot knife of pain stabbed through his skull. He stumbled on the stairs, tried to keep hold of Riki but couldn't and went down on one knee.

Riki woke as his ass hit a hard surface and he found himself entangled in Iason's arms, halfway up the stairs, as the Blondie knelt on one knee beside him. "Iason?" he asked seeing that the Elite was holding his head and squeezing his eyes closed. He struggled to sit up properly. "Iason? What is it? What's wrong?"

Iason violently shrugged away from him as a strange keening noise rose in his throat.

"Cal! Cal!" Riki screamed as he tried to touch Iason again, but suddenly the Blondie's head flew back and red beams shot out of his eyes, hitting the energy field above him and ricocheting to a dozen other points in the condo. He watched the beams burn a hole through a sofa, decimate a table, crash through the windows on the balcony and shatter the liquor cabinet; spilling several bottles onto the floor.

Cal rushed in, in his pajamas and then hit the floor as another ricochet of light almost penetrated him. "What's happening?" he cried as he watched

his master, who looked like he was in agony trapped on the stairwell as hot red beams shot from his eyes.

Riki caught hold of Iason and slapped him, but it had no effect. He shook Iason but the Blondie could not, would not be moved. “Make it stop! How do we make it stop?”

He jumped back, startled as a trash can suddenly dropped over Iason’s head and he looked behind the Blondie to see a slightly out of breath Carrie; he had not even felt her come past him on the stairs. They all paused and looked at Iason who still had not moved, but at least he was no longer burning holes through anything.

“Did you know he could do that?” Riki asked Cal as he joined them. Cal shook his head. “S...should we take it off?”

“Wait.” Yielia said as she started down the stair towards them. She raised her hands and a green glow appeared around the bucket. “Now, slowly remove it.”

Carrie pulled the trash can off Iason’s head and Yielia’s power kept the still shooting beams just a few inches from the Blondie’s face.

“Iason?” Riki again tried to get through to him, but the Blondie seemed incapable of responding.

Iason’s head was thrown back at such an odd angle, as if he was looking straight up at the ceiling. Riki carefully rose and leaned down to kiss his mate. It seemed to take several seconds before Iason started to respond, and as he did, his head slowly moved forward and closer to Riki.

Riki pulled back and they all stared at him. Yielia’s power had ceased as the Blondie’s ice blue eyes returned. “Are you okay?”

“What happened?” Iason asked, curious as he looked at all of them standing there on the stairs. Had they not already gone to bed? “Why are you all standing there?”

“You went off, Iason,” Riki stated anxiously and quickly explained what happened.

Iason carefully turned so he was seated on the stair next to Riki. “I do not understand. I am not capable of that func...” His gaze drifted down to the damage in the living area below. “I did this?”

“Yeah, well, whatever the hell was coming out of your eyes did it.”

Iason held his head, which was throbbing. “I was taking you to bed. That is the last thing I remember.”

“Maybe you should go check in with Jupiter?” Cal suggested.

“Yes.” Iason paused and recalled how Jupiter had shunned him before with Riki. “No. Call Raoul ask him to...No, I...I will go there. I will go to where he is. That...isn’t that better?” What was wrong with him? He couldn’t even think, make a simple decision.

“We’ll go by portal,” Riki decided as he rose and offered Iason a hand up. “It will be quicker.”

“Yes. Yes, let’s go there and...” His head hurt so very badly. Why? Why was this happening to him?

“Iason?”

He turned as they reached the bottom of the stairs to look at Yielia who stood just behind him.

“May I?” she asked and slowly raised her hands. She placed them by his head and closed her eyes.

Iason could feel the pain subsiding and was so filled with relief he could barely speak. “Thank you, Yielia” he said quietly, using her name for the first time since he had known her. Then to Riki he said. “Bring me to Raoul. Quickly now.”

Chapter 14

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul tries to figure out what is going on with Iason

Notes for the Chapter:

I love all who left me such lovely reviews and comments and Kudos. I'm so happy you are enjoying this because it has started to take over my life, much like the last one did! Whew. sorry for the wait on updating, but here is a nice long one for you and I am eager to hear your thoughts. Cheers!

Raoul finished off the soup he had prepared for himself earlier, as this chamber was in his third lab, which was just outside of Tanagura, and so Peter was not available to do so. He walked over to the rejuvenation chamber to check Katze's progress. He viewed the readout on the console attached. Katze's spleen was almost healed, as were the broken ribs and punctured lung. His back would take more time, but it was a clean break so should knit back together easily enough. That one shattered ankle didn't seem to be doing much of anything. There was no improvement in it at all beyond the fact that the bleeding and external tissue had been stemmed and so was not getting worse.

"They really did a job on you, my friend," he murmured as he increased the rate of cellular regeneration and manually added a formula to repair the shattered ankle. "When you wake up we shall have a long talk about the foolishness of martyrdom."

His wrist unit chimed with an incoming message.

"Open channel," he said and Peter's pale face appeared. "What's is it?"

“The animals, Sir, in the lab. Something is wrong, very wrong.”

Raoul glanced at Katze. “I’ll be there soon.” He synced his wrists unit with the chamber so he could still monitor Katze’s life signs, then exited the lab, hurried upstairs and out into the dim lights of a pet club. He slowed his walk, paused to acknowledge a few associates and other Elites who were waiting out the Eclipse with entertainment in the club, then he stepped outside and rushed to his car.

He arrived back at home less than fifteen minutes later and he quickly moved to the locked portal that would take him to his main lab, where he assumed Peter was waiting. He coded the sequence required and stepped into chaos

The test animals he had secured within various sized containers behind force fields were going wild. All but one of the rodents had torn each other to pieces. They were screaming, crying and jumping about in their cells and the heart monitors he had implanted inside each of them were making the machines beep continuously without pause. Any of the cells where there had been more than one of the species behind the field, now held only a single live subject, and that one was in the process of dying. Blood, feces, brain matter all spattered the transparent fields of the cells.

“What is going on?” Raoul moved swiftly to his control console and quickly programmed a sedation gas to be leaked into the cells. It didn’t work. He upped the dosage, but it only seemed to make the animals go more berserk. Some were throwing themselves against the invisible fields, trying to get out and injuring themselves further in the process.

“Damn it!” He swiped at what sounded like a whistling in his ears. “Engage Protocol four dash two five!”

A gray chemical leaked into the cell, immobilizing the animals almost instantly. They all collapsed to the floors of their cells, their screaming and pounding stopped and the beeping of the machines grew silent.

“What was it, Sir?” Peter asked, bewildered, and still shaken by the scene.

“I do not know.” Raoul moved closer to the cells, trying to ascertain the damage. Every one of his test subjects had either killed its mate or died from the nuro-toxin he had released. But what had caused the panic, he wondered? “Prepare a table. I’ll have to do an autopsy to see what caused it.”

“Sir, do you think it might be some kind of unknown pathogen?”

Raoul shook his head and was surprised by the horrible pressure headache that resulted. He glanced around him, then moved to his console and run a series of commands. His lab had the best sterilization filters. Newly processed air was filtered in through the vents from a specialized system that had no outside attachment. The area was completely germ and microbe free, as was required to get the best possible results.

“Unlikely.” He glanced at Peter who was shivering in his slight uniform, and was alarmed when he spotted a small, thin trail of blood seeping out of the Furniture’s left ear and nose. “Get out!” He rushed over, grabbed Peter and practically carried him back through the portal.

“What...” the Furniture managed, struggling to regain his composure and as he shook his head, a ringing started in his ears. “Sir, My...my head feels weird.”

“Sit down.” Raoul gently pushed Peter into a chair and rubbed his own head, which was still throbbing. He never got headaches, never!

“Sir, the lab is a mess. I should...”

“No, stay out.” Raoul stalked to the kitchen, moistened a cloth and returned to press it to Peter’s ear. “You’re bleeding, hold that there.”

“I’m bleeding?” Peter asked dazed, but continued the pressure as instructed. “Sir, the animals, the lab. It needs to be sterilized and...”

“Leave it for now.” Raoul would also need a moment before he returned to the lab and he did not want to have to replace his Furniture, so Peter would have to stay out. “I will remove the carcasses. I want you to contact Reizen

Maz, he knows more about animal diseases that I and may be able to lend some insight. Tell him to come immediately.”

Peter, feeling a little better nodded and rose to walk to the portal that would bring him to the lower levels. “Yes, Sir.”

“Peter?”

The young boy turned back.

“Just let him into the lab through the portal, don’t go down yourself.” If there was an airborne pathogen it would be released the minute he lowered the cell fields, and if it was an auditory attack, as he was beginning to suspect, he did not want to put Peter at risk.

“Yes, Sir.”

Raoul moved to his office and pressed his hand to a wall panel. Inside were a variety of safety masks. He had collected them as a hobby, Elites were not affected by airborne viruses, or gasses, but now he considered using one. Just as he reached for one his wrist unit beeped again.

“Yes?” he demanded quickly.

“We’re coming to your lab,” Riki advised quickly. “Something happened to Iason and you need to see him!”

“What happened to Iason?” Dear Jupiter what was going on? He listened as Riki tried to explain the event then nodded. “I am at home, but I will be at that lab shortly. Wait for me there. The code to get inside is 456FG68, then you’ll have to press yellow and green, and then 96230tgy, white and blue then....”

“Wait, fuck!” Riki was trying to write it down on his data pad. “I’m not a fucking Elite. Start again!”

Raoul repeated the sequence then added nine more numbers, twelve letters, four symbols and six more colours.

“Fine, see you there. I’ll be the one still trying to open your damn door!”

Riki ended the connection and Raoul blinked. “Rude,” he decided then smirked as he grabbed the mask he had been reaching for. He supposed he could have told Riki that Iason’s palm print could also open the door, but where was the fun in that?

Raoul entered the club through the back door so he could go to his lab quietly and without having to be social to the patrons upstairs. As he started down the steps, he paused at the small panel open, by the door to his lab, with wire protruding. With an agitated scowl he stormed in to find Riki and Iason waiting for him, Iason sitting in one of the few chairs and Riki standing beside him.

“What happened to the panel?”

Riki smirked and handed Iason the glass of water he had just retrieved for him. “Your bullshit code took too long so I bypassed it.”

“You bypassed...” Raoul began, annoyed and then thought about it. Yeah, okay he probably deserved that as he had forgotten who he was dealing with. His eyes narrowed dangerously on the mongrel. “Do something like that again I’ll personally remove your fingers from your hand.”

“No, you won’t,” Iason said quietly. “Now stop bickering and come examine me.”

“Why didn’t you go to Jupiter?”

“He’s mad at Her,” Riki stated.

“Mad at Her? Whatever for?”

“It doesn’t matter. Are you going to help me or not?”

Raoul could hear the impatience in Iason's voice and was concerned by it. "Of course, I'm going to help you," he returned and moved to one of the examination tables. "Come up here, please."

"Wow, you get a please?" Riki muttered but helped Iason to stand and move to the table.

"You may wait outside!" Raoul snapped. He was already irritated about what happened in his other lab, he had no patience for Riki's usual nonsense.

"The hell I will!"

"Riki," Iason touched Riki's arm as he lay back on the table. He was suddenly so exhausted he could barely think straight. "Why don't you go up to the bar and get us something to eat?"

"Are you hungry?" Riki's expression softened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only happen to be now and it might help settle me. Go on, be a good boy."

"They won't serve me, I'm a pet."

"They'll serve you," Raoul grumbled as he ran a scanner over Iason's body. "This is my club. You will have no trouble."

Riki blinked in surprise at the Blondie, he figured if anyone would make things difficult for him with his new status it would be Raoul. Instead of commenting on it, he turned back to Iason. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"I'm in the best of care, love. Truly. Go fetch me a glass of Arisian wine,"

"I thought you wanted food?"

Iason blinked at him, at he asked for food?

"Just go get the damn wine," Raoul ordered. "I'll have one as well."

“Get your own...” Riki began but he saw Iason wince and realized that the Blondie was still in pain. He glared at Raoul then leaned down in the pretense of whispering to Iason, but actually it was so he could discretely kiss the Blondie’s cheek. He was really worried. “Can I get a Blue Horizon?”

Iason smiled. “Yes love, anything you like. Go on now.”

“Yes, go away and let me work.”

Riki scowled for a moment longer then turned and walked out.

I don’t know how you put up with him.”

“I don’t know why I put up with you, either,” Iason retorted, annoyed.

Raoul grinned and glanced over the scanner readings, all appeared normal. “Now, what exactly happened?”

Iason quickly explained what Riki had told him about the beams coming from his eyes, as he still had no memory of the occurrence.

“And you believed this nonsense?”

“Raoul, I almost cut Cal in half. I saw the carnage in my living room, furniture has been spliced there are burns across the floor, glass shattered; it was a wreck!”

“As fun as that sounds, Iason, we don’t have such a capability. What you are talking about is science fiction.”

“Are you going to continue to argue with me or help me?”

Raoul sighed and set the scanner down. “Your readings are normal.” He used a penlight and looked into Iason’s eyes, one at a time. “I don’t see anything unusual.”

“There must be! This couldn’t just happen spontaneously!”

“Very well then. I’ll need to remove your eye, do you mind?”

“Only if you don’t put it back!”

“Okay grumpy, settle down.” Raoul stepped away for a moment to retrieve a small, silver, clawed instrument. “This may sting a bit.”

“Just do it already!”

“You’ve been hanging onto that mongrel too long, Iason, you’ve become impatient.”

“I’m not impatient I just want to know what’s going on.” When Raoul remained silent Iason said. “Now!”

Raoul chuckled, stepped back and placed Iason’s left eye in a machine that enhanced the fine details. He had very keen vision, but even he could not see on a microscopic level. “Hmmm...interesting.”

“What is?”

“Hush, I’m evaluating.”

“Hurry up will you, I’m starting to feel very awkward.”

Raoul tsked at him and almost smiled again, then returned his gaze to the machine and his smile faded. “Are you aware that you have fragments of gems in your eyes?”

“Yes, it is what allows me to change the colour.”

“Hmmm.”

All Elites were equipped with one eye colour, however when they were very angry or distressed their eyes turned red, but not by design, it was more an internal warning system that caused them to flash red. Iason was different however, in that he could willfully change the colour of his eyes on a whim. Jupiter had truly gone out of her way to make her favoured son unique.

“Are you aware that there is also a diamond?”

“Yes, the diamond reflects the different colours, allowing them to change.” Iason frowned and sat up, slightly unnerved at having only the one eye which played havoc with his hand-eye coordination. He put his hand over the missing socket to adjust. “I don’t understand what the problem is.”

“There may be none,” Raoul returned. “I just find the type of diamond odd.”

“Odd?” Iason slid off the table. “Why?”

“Because it is a Scetic Diamond, which are not only reflective but...”

Iason moved to the machine, studied the details in his eye and focused on the one aspect they were discussing. “Used in complicated weaponry.”

“Indeed. Has this always been there?”

Iason shook his head. “I couldn’t say. If it has, why would I only have such a lethal reaction now, after all this time?”

“I agree. There is fresh tearing around the ocular membrane, Iason.”

They stared at each other as the implications set in. The regular diamond he had been created with had been replaced?

“How is that possible? I’ve not had any new surgeries and it could not have been done without my knowledge.” Iason paused as he considered the missing time. “Unless...”

“Unless, what?” Raoul demanded, sharply, watching his brother’s furrowed expression. When Iason moved back to the table and sat down, he knew something was greatly disturbing the Syndicate Leader, and that was an unusual occurrence indeed. “What is it, Iason? What has happened?”

“I’m not sure.” Iason was loathe to reveal this new weakness he had discovered, even to Raoul. He trusted that Raoul would not use it against

him, and yet he was finding it difficult to confess. “Can you remove the diamond, Raoul?”

“I can but I have nothing to replace it with, so it may affect your ability to change your eye colour, at least in this one eye.”

“The same diamond must be in both.” Iason considered the alternative. He found changing his eye colour a useful tool when he wanted to be discrete or move unnoticed. He felt even if he changed his appearance, people might recognize the colour of his eyes, as no other Elite had this colour. “You’ll have to remove it from both.”

“Iason, are you sure about this?”

“I cannot have it go off again, Raoul!” What if next time he hit Riki, killed him?

“All right, calm down. I will do my best, but once I am done I expect you to explain about the other thing.”

“What other thing?”

“The other thing you are keeping from me.”

Iason chose not to reply, instead he glanced at the door and worried about Riki’s return. Would his beloved be shocked to see him without his eyes? “Do you have something I can wear while you are doing that?”

“Hmmm?” Raoul glanced up from the machine, fine tuning the measurements of Iason’s eye and the chips inside so he would be able to perform the surgery cleanly. “Yes, I think so.” He moved to a shelf and opened a drawer below it, rummaging around for a moment, before he plucked out a thin, black and silver visor. “You can wear this, it will help with the disorientation as well.”

Iason fit the visor over his eyes and then lay back on the table in an attempt to be patient. “How is Katze?”

“Stable. I’m worried about that foot though.” Raoul picked up a needle thin instrument and put his eyes back against the scope. “It isn’t healing well at all, so he may require some form of physical therapy.”

Iason winced in sympathy, having gone through something similar himself after Dana Bahn. “Just do what you can for him.”

“Of course. Aha!” Raoul smiled and held the instrument up so he could drop the tiny diamond into a specimen dish. “That was easier than I thought it would be. Now for the other one.”

“Can you at least try not to sound like you’re enjoying this?”

“Impossible.” Raoul used the claw instrument to extract the eye and walked back over to Iason. “Visor off, lay back and don’t move or blink.”

Iason did as he was told and remained very still as the eye was returned to his socket, he grimaced as the synapsis inside it gripped it again. It was a nasty, uncomfortable feeling and left his vision blurry. “Must you do the other one?”

“You said to, remember?”

“It’s very...” Iason tried to think of a word that could describe what he was currently feeling. Like someone had filled his eye socket with sand and slid worms inside. “Dry.”

“I have something for that.” Raoul moved away from a moment and retrieved a small bottle. “This will add some moisture and hopefully clear up your vision.”

“How did you know my vision was off?”

“Your pupils are dilated. Now, hold still.”

At the bar Riki noticed several people watching him as he ordered the drinks. The pets on stage moaned and writhed as they fucked each other

while the Elites sat at the booths that surrounded the curved stage, so the pets could be viewed by everyone and from several different angles. At first glance, Riki thought the girl pet was pretty cute, especially the way her breasts jiggled back and forth while the male pet mounted her, but he deliberately kept his gaze in the bar area, knowing if he went back to Iason with an unexplained hard on there'd be hell to pay.

"Can I get some of those chips too?" Riki requested as the bartender returned with his drinks.

"How big a portion?"

"Just regular size..." He thought about Iason and how the Blondie had asked for food. "No, large. A large size."

"It'll take a few minutes, they're made to order."

"That's fine." Riki offered his credit stick but the barman waved it away.

"Iason Mink doesn't pay at this club, and neither do those of his house. Rules of the owner."

Riki shrugged and slid the stick back in his pocket and refused to be grateful to Raoul for it. "Fine by me." Free food and drinks were free food and drinks after all.

He couldn't help glancing back towards the stage as the female pet finally achieved orgasm, sounded like she was having a damn good time, and he it was then he noticed that one Blondie in particular was watching him with an unappealing intensity from across the room. Riki wanted to tell the guy to go fuck himself, but he had learned that if he did it only caused headache's for Iason. Instead, he used what tools he had in this society, stretched provocatively and deliberately exposing his smooth, flat stomach under the half shirt he was wearing which caused his already tight jeans to pull tighter over his ass.

The satisfaction of watching the lust surge into the Elite's eyes was short lived as the Blondie suddenly moved from his chair, strode across the room

and pinned Riki to the bar.

“Hey! You can look but not touch!” Mother fucker, Riki thought as he tried to push back but the Blondie was, like Iason, unable to be moved from his position.

“Where is your master, *pet*? ”

“I’m not a pet anymore!” Riki returned meeting the Blondie’s sneering gaze with flashing anger. If he recalled correctly, this Blondie’s name was Po Laren, and he had always given Riki a hard time. “Haven’t you heard?”

“You will never be anything but a pet, regardless of what Jupiter says.”

“Yeah? I’ll let Her know you said so.”

“You will, will you? And how do you propose to do that, *pet*? ”

“Oh, the next time She calls me in for a chat I’ll tell Her what a dick you are.”

Po Laren stepped back startled, then gripped Riki’s upper arms in a brutal grip. “You dare speak of such things? Dare to spread such a filthy rumor?”

“What rumor? I talk to Jupiter all the time, She insists on it.” A small part of Riki’s brain suddenly remembered that his sessions with Jupiter were supposed to be secret, but this Blondie had really pissed him off, and on top of his worry for Iason, he couldn’t hold back any more. “She made me the consort to Iason Mink, which means I’m no longer a pet, and by calling me one and acting up at me this way, you’re directly going against Her rule.” Riki’s eyes narrowed as he watched Po Lauren’s lips quiver ever so slightly. “Now, if I was you, I wouldn’t want to piss Her off.”

“You...” The Blondie began, trying to recover some of his authority.

“And hands off!” Po Laren was distracted enough that Riki could knock the Blondie’s hands away his arms. “The only one who gets to touch me is Iason, and he doesn’t like it when others leave finger prints. It wouldn’t be too smart to get Jupiter and Iason angry now would it?”

“Brother, leave the mongrel be.”

Riki glanced up at another Blondie, who had dropped his hands upon Po Laren’s shoulders.

“Did you hear the blasphemy coming from its foul mouth!” Po Laren hissed, furious. “It claims to speak to Jupiter!”

“His claims are nonsense,” Gideon insisted, his hard eyes meeting the mongrel’s in warning. “As all mongrel’s are. Come back to the table. A new show is about to begin, it will be interesting.”

Po Laren shrugged off Gideon’s hands and sneered at Riki. “I remember a show not so long ago that was more interesting,” he stated, having recovered some of his pride and demeanor. He leaned in closer to Riki but didn’t touch him. “Why don’t you ask your precious mate about who he prefers in his bed? A skinny, filthy mongrel, or a natural born Elite like Raoul?”

“Po! You go to far!” Gideon snapped but he watched the mongrel pale.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Riki snapped as his stomach lurched and his heart turned over in his chest. “What about Raoul and Iason?”

“Didn’t you know, little consort? They are lovers. Why do you think they are so often together? Do you really think you can compete with a Blondie in bed, little mutt?”

Riki’s legs almost gave out from beneath him, and if the bar hadn’t been behind him he probably would have fallen. Raoul and Iason? Lovers. “You’re a liar!” His head reared back from the force of Po Laren’s blow, knocking over the drinks he had ordered across the bar.

“You dare speak to me that way, you filthy...” The Blondie had raised his hand to deliver another shot but Gideon gripped him and placed himself between the enraged elite and the shaking mongrel.

“Enough, brother! He is not worth it!”

Two other Elites, both Sapphires stepped up at a look from Gideon and took hold of Po Laren, trying to calm the Blondie as they started to lead him away from the bar. Gideon spun around and grabbed Riki's arm, shoving him forward.

"Get out of here, now!"

Riki fled, his heart pounding, his anger turning to fear. What the fuck was wrong with him? He knew better than to antagonize a Blondie, and that other one had probably saved his life! Iason wasn't up to rescuing him at that moment and he was an idiot to have started something like that.

But Po Laren's words echoed in his head and he couldn't dismiss them. The idea that Raoul and Iason had been lovers was so unreal, so preposterous and fuck! It hurt his heart so much to think of it. He'd always thought he had been the first one Iason had ever been with; the Blondie had said as much himself.

He stumbled through the nearly invisible doorway that led to the lab downstairs and tried to catch his breath. No, Iason had said Riki was the first pet he had taken to bed, not the first being. Oh fuck! Oh Fuck! Riki massaged the pain in his chest and tried not to think of the two of them together. He'd been with other men, lots of other men, but that was different. Somehow, knowing Raoul, the Blondie who had always hated him, who he always hated in return, had been that close, that intimate with Iason. It was almost too much to bear and Riki felt betrayed somehow.

The Blondie could have just been trying to wind him up, but Riki could not get the image now of Raoul and Iason together in bed out of his mind. Is that what the two of them did whenever they were alone together, which was pretty damn often now that he thought about it. Had they been fucking each other this entire time, or had Raoul's attempts to get Riki away from Iason been because the Blondie wanted to continue the relationship?

Hurt quickly turned to anger as he flew down the stairs and burst into the lab, then stopped, appalled at the scene of Raoul bent over Iason on the table, their heads ridiculously close together. Were they kissing? Had he been played this entire time?

“Get away from him!” Riki screamed and threw himself at Raoul hard enough to actually shove the unsuspecting Blondie backwards and into a tray of instruments. “Keep you fucking paws off!”

“Riki!” Iason admonished as he started to sit up, glad that Raoul had only been putting drops in his eyes and not extracting the next one. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“How dare you!” Raoul roared and made a lunge for Riki, but Iason quickly hopped down from the table and put the mongrel behind him.

“Raoul, stop!”

“He attacked me, Iason! With absolutely no provocation and I will not...”

“I had plenty of provocation!” Riki hissed, even as Iason held him back with one arm. “You were fucking kissing him!”

“I beg your pardon?” Both Raoul and Iason said simultaneously looking at Riki.

“Don’t try to lie! I know all about it, and if you touch him again I’ll rip your fucking arms off!”

“Touch me again, pet and you will be fodder for my....”

“Enough!” Iason insisted then turned to clasp his agitated mate by the shoulders. “Riki, you should not have done that to Raoul.”

“But he...”

“Apologize, now.”

“The fuck I will!”

“Stop!” Iason gave Riki a hard shake, forcing the mongrel to focus on him and not the Blondie behind them. “Do as I say, pet.”

It was absolutely the worst thing Iason could have said. Riki took a swing at him which Iason easily blocked, then wrapped his arms around Riki so the mongrel could not try again. “What is wrong with you? Behave!”

“I’m not your fucking pet!” Riki was appalled to find tears had sprung to his eyes, so very hurt by Iason’s words and actions he could hardly stand it. He thought things had changed? He thought he meant more to Iason now than just a play thing? His struggles increased. “Let me go, you bastard! Let me go so I can get the fuck out of this place and you two can go fuck each other until you die!”

Both Iason and Raoul exchanged a surprised glance, and then a worried one.

“Riki, what do you mean by that?” Iason asked, softening his voice but not his hold on the squirming young man.

“I know all about it! You and Raoul are lovers!” Riki managed to tilt his head so he could glare up at Iason venomously. “Deny it then! Deny you fucked Raoul!”

“Actually, to be precise, I did the...”

“Raoul!” Iason snapped and shot his brother a lethal look of warning, before turning Riki in his arms so the mongrel faced him. “Riki, that was a very long time ago.”

Riki’s heart was bleeding, it had to be because he felt all the fight leave his body in the wake of agonizing devastation. He’d expected, no hoped that it had been a lie, that he’d just gotten worked up by that asshole Po Laren, but it was true?

Watching his lover’s expression Iason hurriedly continued. “It was merely an experiment and meant nothing. I love you, my dearest Riki. Only you.”

“I may vomit,” Raoul retorted and ignored the mild sting Iason’s words had caused.

“Hush,” Iason told him then folded his arms around Riki in an embrace instead of a prison. “Raoul is my brother, the only true brother I have...”

“So you decided to fuck him?” Riki accused, alarmed that a ball of tension had risen in his throat. He was not going to cry over this! He was *not*! “Don’t you see? That’s why he hates me! Why he’s always tried to take me away from you and he’s always giving me a hard time. He’s jealous!”

“My abhorrence of your continued presence in Iason’s life is due to the fact that you’re a filthy mongrel who is set on destroying Iason’s position, and not some affair that happened a lifetime ago.”

“Me destroying?” Riki countered, furious. “He kidnapped me! Why the fuck don’t you hate him for bringing me here?”

“Regardless!” Iason insisted firmly, before it escalated further. “Raoul and I are not lovers and he no longer hates you, Riki. In fact, he actually likes you.” Iason kept his arm around Riki as he turned to meet his brother’s gaze in warning. “Don’t you?”

“Like is such a strong word,” Raoul hedged.

“Fuck you!”

“Riki! Stop!” Iason felt another headache coming on and wondered if Jupiter might consider opening a day care for these two unruly children so he could take a break? “Raoul is just teasing you.”

“Bullshit.”

Iason sighed, moved behind Riki and pulled him into his chest. “Raoul, tell him, please?”

Raoul sighed heavily in annoyance. He was still livid the mongrel dared to push him away from Iason, and he would frankly rather have a flaming rod rammed up his ass than give even an inch of security to Iason’s pet, but then his gaze fell on Riki’s face and the agony he saw there alarmed him. This

was more than just jealousy, he realized, which was always a fun trait to manipulate, the pet was truly hurting.

“Raoul.”

“I am...less inclined to beat you to death and throw your lifeless body in the river than I once was.” He glared at Iason. “Happy?”

Iason allowed his gratitude and his amusement to show in his gaze, then looked down as Riki turned in his arms and embraced him.

“Tell him to fuck off,” the mongrel murmured against Iason’s chest, allowing a small piece of relief to enter his burning heart.

“What?” Iason asked, just as quietly.

“Tell him to fuck off and...and I’ll forgive you.”

“I will not be rude, Riki.”

“Fine.” Riki started to push away. “Have fun playing with yourself then.”

Iason’s hold on him tightened. “We both know that is an idle threat as I can make you want me very easily.”

“My body, sure, but not my heart.” Riki lifted his eyes to Iason’s. He knew he wasn’t being fair, God knew that Iason had certainly been jealous of Guy and that his former pairing partner had caused both of them untold trouble and sorrow. “No more kisses, no more talking, no more sharing. I’ll completely shut you out and just be an unwilling pet again.”

“Oh please,” Raoul muttered before Iason could even reply. “Even I know that is...what was your term...bullshit.”

But Iason wasn’t paying attention to Raoul, he was studying the pain in Riki’s eyes, the betrayal and understood it because he had felt something similar as well; not with Guy, as Riki might suspect, but with Mimea. Riki’s mounting of that pet, regardless of his reasons, had given Iason such a sense

of hurt and betrayal at the time that he had almost killed his beloved pet over it.

He lifted a gloved hand to Riki's face, and rather than argue that they had both had a life before each other, said. "Raoul..."

"Iason, don't you dare!"

"Fuck off."

Raoul scowled, even as Riki's arms slid further around Iason and the mongrel lifted his face to be kissed, which Iason happily complied. "I hate you both," he grumbled and picked up the claw instrument again. "Get back on the damn table, Iason, before I change my mind and splice your pet with one of my lab munkies."

Iason cradled Riki's face and stared down at him to ensure they were okay, then he settled back on the table. "By the way where are our drinks?"

"Oh, about that..." Riki hedged and quickly turned away as Raoul moved in to take Iason's right eye. Iason's hand reached out and gripped his, but didn't force him to look. "There was kind of an altercation."

"Why am I not surprised." Raoul helped Iason fix the visor on his face before bringing the eye over to the telescopic machine.

"You can look now, love."

Riki turned back and his eyes widened at the visor over the Blondie's eyes. "What's that?"

"Just a shield to help me focus. Now, tell me what happened upstairs."

Riki reluctantly did so and watched Iason scowl.

"That doesn't sound like Po at all. He's usually more congenial, at least in public."

"I've noticed a few of our brothers have been acting strangely as of late," Raoul said, never taking his eyes away from the delicate surgery he was performing. "I was going to speak to you about...Ow!"

Both Iason and Riki glanced at the Blondie startled and was surprised to see that Raoul's lovely blond hair had frizzed out almost a foot from his head.

Iason sat up immediately. "What happened?"

"I think it was booby trapped." Raoul muttered, even as he placed the tiny diamond into another specimen container. He noticed his hand was shaking and wasn't really surprised considering the level of voltage that had suddenly surged through him.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course." Raoul set the specimen in a secure box next to the first diamond he had extracted, then noticed something in his peripheral and batted at it. "What is that?"

Riki snickered. "It's your hair." He'd never seen a Blondie with anything but perfectly straight, silky hair and the sight before him now was hysterical, but he was doing his best not to laugh.

"My hair!"

Raoul's appalled look was Riki's undoing and he lost it.

"Riki," Iason admonished, though he could also see the amusing side of it. "It must be from the shock. Are you sure you are all right?"

"Quite all right, I think." Raoul moved to a mirrored wall and attempted to pat down his fly away hair, but to no avail.

"Do you have a towel?" Riki asked, still giggling.

"A towel? Yes, over there in the cupboard." Raoul pointed across the room and Riki walked over to it. He then moved to the small food synthesizer and requested a small bowl of coconut oil.

“What do you need that for?” Iason asked as he watched his mate carefully dip the towel in the mixture.

“It helps remove the static.” Riki walked over to Raoul who was still glaring at his reflection. He paused, suddenly uncomfortable with helping the Blondie, but then Iason smiled at him encouragingly. “Um...could you sit down?”

“Why?” Raoul demanded, furious that his hair wouldn’t lay down.

“Just...” Riki’s temper flared but then he caught Iason’s gaze again. “Can you...please sit down?”

Raoul scowled at him then pulled a chair over and sat. “What are you up to?”

As soon as the Blondie was seated Riki carefully started working the damp towel through Raoul’s hair, selecting only a handful of strands at a time. He was so involved in what he was doing, and trying not to think about who he was doing it to, that he missed the silent exchange between the two Blondies.

Raoul had never had anyone touch his hair, not even Peter. As the Blondie’s crowning glory, it never needed any maintenance, unless he wanted to wear it in a different style, which he never did. He could not deny that what Riki was doing actually felt quite lovely.

“What is this supposed to do?” he asked.

“It’ll take the static from your hair. You’ll need to wash it later, but not for a few hours if you can.”

“I see. And what oil did you use?”

“You can use any oil, but coconut oil has natural properties that adds to the health of your hair that’s better than the other ones.”

“I see.” Raoul had to work to keep his eyes open and not simply relax fully into what almost felt like a caressing massage. “Where did you learn this?”

“The weapons the Midas police use carry a pretty heavy shock, and some of the pricks put them up almost on full. Not enough to kill, but enough to really hurt for a few days. My gang got shocked with one more than once and their hair did the same thing. This was the only way to reverse the effect, just washing it made the static even worse.”

Raoul considered Riki’s words, he sometimes forgot the rough life that the mongrel had been born into and felt a speck of sympathy for him. “Were you ever shocked in such a manner?”

“Nope, they never got close enough to hit me.”

Riki stepped back and examined Raoul’s hair to see if he had missed any strands but the Blondie’s hair was once again perfectly, gorgeously straight, and now it had a very healthy-looking shine to it as well. He looked down at the towel in his hands and very briefly considered shoving it down the Blondie’s throat to see if Raoul would choke on it, but dismissed the idea when he saw that Iason’s eyes narrowed on him, as if guessing the plan.

“Done,” he muttered and returned to Iason as Raoul rose and examined the finished product in the mirror.

“Hmmm...not bad.” Raoul refused to say thank you, but he had to admit Riki did an excellent job. “Perhaps you should apply as a hair dresser instead of a technician.”

Riki started to make an angry retort but Iason wisely covered his mouth with his hand.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Raoul. That looked like it hurt.”

“The shock, it did a bit, but I’m fine.” He returned to the telescopic machine. “And I removed the diamond, which was the point.”

“So...is anyone gonna tell me what happened? Why Iason’s eyes did that freaky thing?” Again he again turned away as Raoul returned Iason’s eye to its socket.

“I will when we go home.” Iason removed the visor and allowed Raoul to put the moisture drops in his right eye to clear his vision and discomfort. “Thank you for your help, Raoul.”

“We still need to talk,” Raoul reminded. “But it’s late and I have too many other things to do, and I’ve had enough of your mongrel’s behavior, so get the hell out of my lab.”

Iason smiled and rose. “We’ll leave you to it then.”

At the door, Riki glanced over his shoulder and stuck his tongue out at Raoul, both surprised and amused when the Blondie returned the gesture in kind.

Raoul chuckled at the exchange, despite himself, then shook his still tingling arm. He’d go check on Katze, then call Peter to see if the assistance he had requested had arrived and then...His eyes fell on the diamonds. That was a mystery that also needed his attention.

Chapter 15

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki brings Iason home but is still upset. (MATURE SCENES- DO NOT READ IF THIS OFFENDS YOU)

Please review :-)

Riki and Iason arrived back from Raoul's and Cal was immediately at the door waiting to take their jacket and cloak.

“Can I get you anything, Sir?”

Iason looked down at Cal and patted the boy's head. “No, thank you, Cal. It's late, go to bed now.”

Cal flushed at the unprecedeted show of affection and nodded. “As you wish, Sir.”

“Cal?”

The boy turned back to his Master.”

“You are no longer Furniture.”

Cal nodded. “I...I know, Sir.”

“So you may call me Iason, from now on.”

Both Cal and Riki's expressions went slack with shock, but Riki's turned into a wide grin.

“I...I...if that is what you wish.”

“Say it,” Iason encouraged gently.

“I...” Cal wet his lips. “Iason.”

“Good boy.” Iason patted Cal’s head again and turned to Riki, who he had been hoping to please with his gesture and pull him out of his sulk. “I’m exhausted love. Let’s go to bed.”

Cal watched them head upstairs, unable to move from his position. “I can call him Iason?” he whispered to himself in amazement.

Such a privilege was given only to Elites and Jupiter, and of course Riki called his master Iason all the time. He had referred to Iason by name many times but never in the Blondie’s presence, never as a personal address. He felt as if he had been given a rare and special gift and warmth filled the cold knot that seemed to have formed permanently in his chest.

“Iason. Yes, Iason. No, Iason. Oh my...” He put his hands to his hot cheeks as he wandered back to his room. “My master, Iason. Goodness, it sounds better each time I say it!”

Riki helped Iason to undress and settled him on the bed. He was still upset over the idea of him and Raoul, but he was happily surprised by the Blondie’s interaction with Cal. Besides, Iason truly looked tired and his concern outweighed his jealousy. It wasn’t very often that he got to take care of the Iason, and he could be nurturing when he had to be. As leader of Bison, it had been his responsibility to take care of his gang when they were injured or upset, and he’d spent many a night talking them through some emotional trials, bathing blood from their faces and bandaging various limbs, as a doctor was rarely available in Ceres.

Iason lay back and then reached for Riki when he realized the mongrel was not getting undressed. “Come to bed, love. I need you.”

Riki pulled the covers over the Blondie, not quite ready to let Iason touch him yet, so okay his anger wasn’t completely gone. “I want a glass of water. I’ll be right back, okay.”

“Hurry back.”

“Such a baby,” Riki tsked and made a show of tucking the covers all the way around Iason’s body, causing the Blondie to chuckle. “Comfy? Cozy?”

“Snug as a bug.”

“Good. Do you want a drink?”

“I only want you, love.”

“Okay, be back in a minute.”

Riki lowered the lights and stepped out, then closed the door behind him. He went down stairs and entered the kitchen. Retrieving a glass from the cupboard he moved to the water dispenser and set it for a full glass. He would never admit it, but what happened with Iason had scared the shit out of him. Something was very wrong with the Blondie, and he didn’t like having to depend on Raoul to find out.

Raoul. That motherfucker. The last few years the Blondie had been so pretentious and insistent about the rules regarding an Elite engaging in a physical relationship, especially with his pet, yet he’d already had sex with Iason. It hurt, he realized, not because he wasn’t Iason’s first, but because it was Raoul, the one Blondie who had made his life hell from the moment he’d been brought to Eos.

His water was ready so he picked it up and sipped it as he returned to the living room, still needing to cool down his temper. When he caught movement on the balcony and moved towards it. Yuela was standing by the barrier, facing the city much as Riki often did.

“Why are you still up?” he asked, startling her and she spun around.

“Ma...Riki. I wished to wait until you returned.” She had seen them come in but chose not to intrude. “Is he better?”

“Yeah, well, more or less.” Riki tried not to shudder as he thought about the explanation that Iason had given him on their way home. How could

someone could have implanted such weapons in the Blondie's eyes without Iason knowing. The idea was bizarre and frightening.

He pushed it out of his mind because it was not helping him calm down, and moved to stand next to Yielia. He set his glass on the wide barrier. "Listen, thanks, for what you did before."

"I am happy to be of service to you."

"So, why are you out here?"

"I was thinking that although it lacks trees and natural landscapes and structure of the buildings are actually quite lovely."

"Well, this is the capital city, so they have to make an impression." He sipped his water and grew quiet for several moments before finally speaking again. "Yielia, what you did for Iason...well we would have been in real trouble if you hadn't been here."

Yielia turned to study him. "You could have done the same, Maku," she said softly. "If you only..."

Riki held up his hand and she stopped speaking. He wasn't blind, he had seen how miserable she had been since he told her she had to go back to Avalon, and if he was completely honest with himself, his chest hurt a little thinking about her leaving. He didn't know if that was the supposed bond she claimed they had or just because he had unwillingly gotten used to her being there. She wasn't all bad, really, when she wasn't pushing him to practice this power thing.

"I have a proposition for you."

She blinked and waited patiently.

"*If I let you stay, do you promise not to harass me about training?*"

Yielia's heartbeat quickened. She would do almost anything not to go back to Avalon and be subject to the horrible pain being away from him caused.

Not only that, but she had grown very attached to Riki in the last few months. “I only wish you to understand it, so that you...”

“I know, and I get it. I do.” Riki turned away again and stared out at the city. Iason would probably be pissed that he let her stay, but the Blondie had left the choice up to him. “I’ve been dealing with a lot, Yielia. A whole shit load of things I wasn’t really prepared for. This power thing, or whatever is...I’m just not ready for that on top of everything else.” He glanced at her. “Can you understand that? Can you promise to leave it be, for now at least, until I’m ready to deal with it? If you can, then you can stay.”

“Oh, Maku.” Tears sprang to Yielia’s eyes. It was the first time he had truly opened up to her about his real feelings. “I never meant to pressure you. Of course, I will wait. Happily so, and I do not have to train you in the use of your power, but I would be so very glad to tell you more of Avalon and your people, if you will allow it.”

Riki nodded. “Yeah, that we can do.” He pointed a finger at her. “But not every day.”

“Of course not.”

“Cal usually gives me lessons every other day on different things, so...you can work with him and incorporate it into that time.”

Yielia nodded, smiling broadly. She bowed to him. “Thank you, Maku.”

“And stop calling me that!” he added, but the smirk he wore took away some of the sting.

“Yes, Riki.”

“Good. Okay, good.” He finished off his glass and handed it to her. “Can you put that back in the kitchen? I’m going to bed.”

“I will. I wish you pleasant dreams.”

Riki started up the stairs and, as an afterthought, moved further down the hall to the area that housed the guest rooms. He knocked gently on the first

door he came to, and when there was no answer, he quietly pushed it open.

“Carrie?”

Carrie had fallen asleep face down on the massive bed and had reverted to her cat form. It made him wonder if it was hard keeping one form over the other for too long? Walking quietly to the cupboard where Cal kept extra blankets, he retrieved a thick blue one and returned to drape it over her.

She was snoring, which he fully intended to tease her about later, but then he realized there was almost a little whistle in the noise. Curious, he crouched down and realized it was closer to a purr than a snore. Aww, so cute! He couldn’t tease her about that. His hand moved to the long black mane of hair which fell over her face. It was odd how her mane was black but her Human hair was red.

He pulled back suddenly when Carrie shifted in her sleep and rolled onto her side, facing him, but she didn’t wake. His eyes fell to her exposed breasts and he felt himself grow aroused. What the hell was wrong with him? Carrie was a pal, a buddy and someone who he could verbally spar with and tease. He didn’t want to think about her in that way. Swallowing, he started to pull the blanket back over her.

“Riki?” she murmured and caught the guilty panicked look he gave her as he dropped the blanket and shot to his feet.

“I...I didn’t want you...you fell asleep...ah...naked. So, I...the blanket...over you.” What was wrong with him? He’d seen her in her cat form before and it never affected him like this! It certainly never gave him a fucking hard-on like he had now.

Her cat eyes flickered to his obvious erection, unable to be hidden with the tight jeans he wore, but instead of commenting she rolled and put her back to him. “How’s Jason?”

“He seems okay.” Riki lowered his head and tried to cover his obvious state. Despite the life he had in Ceres, felt shame fill him. “I’m sorry.”

She slid her hand back towards him and he reached for it. “It’s just because you’re tired, sweetie, and stressed.”

He knew that was true, but he still felt like a pervert because it was Carrie. “Yeah.”

Turning back, she sat up, holding the blanket against her. “What is it?”

“I just wondered... Your hair is red when you’re Human, but black when you’re like this. I just wondered why.”

“I dye my Human hair.”

“Oh.”

“Go to bed, Riki.”

A very small part of him thought about asking if Carrie might be up for a go, but he knew that was his anger talking because he wanted to hurt Iason the way he had been hurt when he learned about Raoul.

“Iason slept with Raoul!” he blurted out suddenly because he had to say it to someone.

“What?” Carrie bolted back up in bed, only barely remembering to cover herself as she slowly morphed back into her Human form. “When? Tonight?”

“No. Years ago, or so they say.”

Carrie released a breath of relief. “Oh good.” She glanced back at Riki and saw the pain in his eyes. “Oh, not good.” She moved over and patted the bed beside her. “You’re upset?”

“Yes!”

“But it was years ago, Riki!”

“It was Raoul!” Riki dropped on the bed beside facing her. “I know we each had other lives before, and I know, I know it’s stupid to be jealous over sex because, fuck it’s just sex, but this was Raoul! I hate that fucker!”

She patted his hand in sympathy. “What did Iason say about it?”

“Just that it happened years ago and doesn’t mean anything.”

“And you don’t believe him?”

“I do but...”

“But it was with Raoul,” she finished, understanding just how much Riki hated that particular Blondie. She thought the entire scenario was odd and more than a little creepy. Weren’t all Blondie’s brothers? “But you can’t hold that against Iason. He didn’t even know you then.”

“I know! But...” Riki shrugged and looked down at their joined hands. “Carrie, I’m so mad. I just...I want to hurt him back but...”

“That won’t solve anything and you know it.” She pulled him into her embrace. “Don’t you?”

“It hurts!”

“Oh, I know it does.” She held him and caressed his hair. “Heartache and betrayal is the worst kind of pain.” Riki nodded against her. “But, Iason didn’t really betray you, Riki, because you were not together then. You can’t hold this against him or hurt him for it.”

“I know.” Riki rested his chin on her shoulder and slid his arms around her, trying not to think about the bare skin of her back that rested beneath his fingertips. “I know it’s stupid but I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Then talk to him about it.”

“He says it’s nothing! He said he was sorry, but he acts like it’s no big deal!”

“To him it probably isn’t.”

“But it’s a big deal to me!”

“That’s *your* problem, Riki.” She pulled back and gripped his arms as she stared into his eyes. “I’m sorry you’re hurting, but you can’t blame Iason because of how you feel about Raoul. He had no idea you and Raoul would be at odds in the Future. Riki, he had no idea about you being in the future.” She cradled his cheek. “You can’t let this come between you two just because you hate Raoul.”

“I just want him to know how much it hurts!”

“Then tell him!”

“He doesn’t care!”

“I don’t believe that and neither do you.”

He leaned his head against hers. “I feel so stupid getting mad, but I can’t help it.”

“You’re allowed to feel what you feel, Riki, just don’t let it consume you and ruin what you feel for Iason.” She caught his chin and smiled at him. “But if you really want me to I’ll go over and tear Raoul’s throat out.”

Riki nodded, because this was what he wanted, someone to say he wasn’t being a complete idiot and to be in his corner. “Yeah, could you do that?”

“Absolutely, but can it wait until morning, I’m really tired.”

“Can you rip his dick off too?”

“Of course!” She slid back under the covers as he rose. “I’ll even bring it back to make a stew if you like.”

“Good. That’d be good.” He sighed heavily. “If only.”

“If only.” She reached up and squeezed his fingers. They both knew that her threats were idle ones, but it seemed to have lifted his spirits somewhat.

“Things will look better in the morning, Riki.”

“Yeah.” He moved to the door, his heart lighter, then turned back to look at her. “Carrie?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.

“Any time.”

“Good night.”

“Thanks for the blanket.”

“Yeah,”

Riki stepped out and closed the door.

By the time he had returned to the room he shared with Iason, the Blondie had also appeared to have fallen asleep. “Yes,” he whispered to himself as he undressed. “My plan worked.” He crawled under the covers and was immediately snatched by his lover.

“What plan was that?” Iason murmured.

“I thought you were asleep,” Riki whispered looking up at the beautiful Blondie, he’d known of course that Iason would know the minute he entered the room, asleep or not.

“I thought you were coming right back?

“There was an unexpected detour, I had to go the long way around.”

“I have something long for you.” Iason slid his hand down over Riki’s groin, delighting in Riki’s immediate response. “And thick as well.”

“That ol’ thing?” Riki tossed and then sighed as Iason started kissing his neck. “You should rest.”

“I am not tired.”

“You were when we came in.”

“That was before you made me wait for you. Now I am completely awa...”
Iason surprised them both by yawning and Riki chuckled.

“Sure you are.” He snuggled closer and laid his head on Iason’s chest. He did feel better after talking to Carrie, but he still didn’t want to have sex right now because he knew it would make him think more about Raoul and Iason. “Come on, let’s go to sleep. We can fuck all day tomorrow if you want.”

“What I want is to take you now.”

“I know but I’m really tired too.”

“Riki!” Iason sighed, exasperated. If he were the Blondie he once was, no amount of protests would have stopped him from taking his lovely pet. “I am in great need!”

Riki suddenly pushed away and sat up, frustrated because he was trying to avoid an argument. “Then why don’t you call Raoul if your need it so bad?”

Iason stared at Riki’s back and heaved out a heavy sigh. So that was still an issue was it? “You said you had forgiven me, Riki,” he reminded annoyed. He’d even been horribly rude to his brother in order to earn that forgiveness.

“I have,” Riki returned, even as he picked at the pattern on the blanket that covered his nakedness. He just couldn’t forget, he realized. “I just...keep thinking about it.”

“Why? There is nothing to think about. It is in the past, far in the past, and has nothing whatsoever to do with our relationship.”

“What about your *relationship* with Raoul?”

“What of yours with Guy?” Iason snapped back.

Riki whipped his head around to look at the Blondie. “Guy was my pairing partner and we’re mongrels! It’s different!”

Iason also sat up so they could face each other. “How is it different? You admitted to having many men, Riki, just as I have had many pets....”

“Raoul isn’t a fucking pet! He’s a Blondie!”

“Yes, he is, and whatever I did with him is not your concern!”

Riki glared at Iason and tried to swallow the stab of pain through his chest. “Then fucking go see if he wants to do more of it with you now, you bastard.”

Iason grabbed Riki before the mongrel could toss back the covers and leap from the bed. He pulled Riki against his bare chest, despite his lover’s struggle.

“Get off me!”

“You will not leave this bed, Riki.”

“Fuck you!”

“Fine!” Iason suddenly lay on his back, managed to spin Riki around so that the mongrel faced him, then trapped Riki once more against him. “If that is what it will take for you to get past this.”

“What are you talking about?” Riki squirmed against the hold, his naked body flush against Iason’s, close enough that their cocks rubbed together and he instantly grew hard again. He shook it off. He was still mad damn it. “Let me go!”

“No. You made me an offer and I have accepted.”

Riki’s struggled paused in confusion. “What?”

“You said fuck me, then do it, Riki.” Iason slid his legs around Riki’s lower half, pulling them intimately closer and kept one arm across his shoulders to

keep Riki in place, so that he could cradle his mate's face with his free hand. "If you are so upset that Raoul fucked me then fix it." He moved his face closer and whispered in Riki's ear. "You fuck me."

Riki shivered at Iason's words and felt his dick harden even more as his heart started pounding against his chest. "I can't!" he almost whimpered, wishing more than anything he could, but Iason had conditioned him better than he believed possible.

The minute he even thought about putting his dick inside the Blondie it was...Fuck. Iason *was* still his master and that was the problem. Despite all that had happened, all the years he spent denying it, he'd been conditioned to accept that role and now he couldn't un-accept it.

"Why?" Iason asked gently.

Riki shook his head, humiliated.

"Very well, shall I tell you what Raoul and I did?"

"What? No! I don't want to hear that shit!"

"There is only one thing that will shut me up, Riki." Iason watched the mongrel patiently, saw the indecision and hurt in his eyes, but there was also desire and, perhaps, was that hope? "You don't have to fuck me, but you can make love to me, can't you? That is something we have done many times."

"We...we have?"

"Of course! Every time I have touched you, since the moment I fell in love with you, it has been so." Iason slid his hand down to cup Riki's ass and squeezed. "Think about it, my love. To be inside of me, you can make me feel the way I feel when I am inside of you. Is that not what you want? Would that not help bury the vision of Raoul and I?"

"I just..." Riki suddenly relaxed against Iason. All the fight just melted away. "I know I had Guy and...and lots of others but..."

“But?” Iason lifted his hand to stroke Riki’s hair.

“You said you never did it with a pet before.”

“That’s true.”

“Well I...I thought that meant...I thought I was...” Riki dipped his head as his cheeks flamed.

“Tell me, love. Please?”

“Special,” came Riki’s whispered reply.

Iason slowly released Riki, relieved that his lover did not immediately bolt from the bed again. He turned them on their sides so he could raise up on one elbow and stare down at the mongrel. “You *are* special, Riki, incredibly special.”

“But you did it with Raoul!”

“Yes, but you are making it out as more than it was. It was a mere dalliance in our youth, Riki, and nothing close to what you and I have.”

“I bet Raoul doesn’t think that.”

“What Raoul thinks is up to him.” Iason sighed again, frustrated. “Why can’t you like him?”

“I don’t trust him and he still treats me like a pet.”

Yes, but you have seen how well he treats his own pets. You were at odds at one time but now he has a real affection for you, Riki. He is merely teasing you, most of the time.”

“Bullshit. He wants to get me in his lab and dissect me. Why do you let him say those things to me?”

“What should I say? He is my brother...”

“I’m your mate!” The words were out before Riki could contemplate their consequence. “I...I mean...” He suddenly flopped onto his stomach and buried his face in the pillows.

Iason stroked a hand down Riki’s back. “You make me so happy, Riki, in the simplest of ways.”

“Yeah, well...whatever.”

“I cannot change what happened with Raoul and myself, it is in the past and even I do not have such power. No more than you can change your past with Guy. Riki, Raoul was not my partner in the way Guy was yours. Yes, we were lovers, briefly, but I have not even thought about it in so long that I almost denied it when you brought it up. That is how little the memory means to me.”

Riki shuffled a little closer to Iason but didn’t take his steaming face out of the pillow.

“The memories we share however are cemented in my mind and I revisit them often. They are what will carry me into the future. Such are the things I think about. The things that I do to your body, how responsive you are, how much pleasure it gives me to see you come; these are the memories that are precious to me. Can you understand?”

Riki nodded but still couldn’t bring himself to meet the Blondie’s knowing gaze.

“Then, shall I help you find your courage?” Iason murmured, silkily as he carefully rolled Riki onto his back, smiled when the mongrel took the pillow with him to hide his face. “Shall I show you how precious you are to me? How excited you make me, Riki?”

Riki bit his lip and felt his face grow hotter, even as he managed an impossibly quiet consent. His hips arched automatically when Iason’s mouth covered his throbbing arousal. So good, he thought. He’d had blow-jobs before, given his share as well, but nothing compared to how Iason had mastered the technique. That thought led him to wonder if he had practiced

on Raoul, and he felt his desire immediately diminish, but Iason wasn't going to let that happen and swallowed Riki all the way down to give him a thrillingly hard suck.

"I...Iason!" he gasped and had to finally pull the pillow away to breathe.
"W...wait."

Iason ignored him and vigorously pursued his task until Riki was moaning and whimpering on the bed, then he rose up to do to Riki's mouth and tongue what he had just done to Riki's cock. Riki was gasping now, gripping fistfuls of Iason's beautiful hair as he struggled to breathe, yet refused to let the Blondie pull away from his mouth.

"More!"

The Blondie complied by laving each of Riki's nipples in turn, pinching them, squeezing, licking and sucking until Riki was again arching off the bed in an effort to get even closer to the Blondie's fabulous mouth. This was what he needed, he realized, and wondered why he had fought against it? There was no way that it had been like this with Iason and Raoul, no way that their coupling had met with the same passion and pleasure that came from Iason's single touch.

Riki had expected at any moment for Iason to penetrate him, was itching for it, so he was shocked when instead Iason climbed up to straddle him instead. "What are you..." He began and then Iason shoved himself down over Riki's hard, aching organ, impaling himself in one swift stroke. "I...Iason!"

"Now, my love," Iason said, and attempted to remain still despite the incredible desire to move. "*You* are the master. Do with me what you will."

Iason had spoken the truth, when he had claimed to have forgotten his affair with Raoul. Even the mongrel Guy teasing him about letting Riki top him, a reference that had confused him at first, had not brought back the memory of how it felt to have another inside of him. He could easily consider Riki as his first and only lover. Slowly, he smiled as he realized that perhaps that

was what Riki was after all, and what the mongrel had wanted to be all along.

Riki's hands instinctually gripped Iason's hips. "C...Can I?" he asked, trembling.

"Yes, my love. I am yours. Take me as hard or as slow as you wish."

Slowly, Riki started to move and almost passed out at the amazing sensation being inside the Blondie gave him. It had been so long, too long since he'd been on this side of things. "Oh...God..." he whispered, and yet he couldn't bring himself to go any faster because he was already so close to completion. "I can't...I can't hold it!"

Iason suddenly thought of something Raoul had asked him to do during one of their couplings, something that, if he remembered correctly, had the Blondie crying out with pleasure. With a smile, he used his interior muscles to clench and squeeze the cock inside of him and was thrilled as Riki gasped out his orgasm moments later.

Feeling slightly guilty for having thought of Raoul for even a moment during their passionate love making, Iason decided to offer Riki even more. Instead of climbing off him, he switched their positions so he was on his back and Riki was cradled between his legs, then he captured Riki's mouth in a hungry kiss, all the while keeping them intimately connected. Almost immediately he could feel Riki's cock hardening again inside him. Such a wonderfully responsive boy, he thought pleased. He was even more thrilled when Riki wrapped a firm hand around Iason's organ and started to pump him.

Riki was so aroused by the new position and kissing that it only took a few seconds for him to be fully erect again and he started to thrust into Iason, while still keeping up the rhythm his hand had started on the Blondie's cock. He leaned forward and licked and sucked at Iason's nipples, as the Blondie had so often done to him and was rewarded when Iason arched his back in response.

“Yes, love,” Iason whispered, enjoying all the new sensations Riki was providing.

How had he forgotten this, he wondered? This intimately full feeling of another inside of him. Iason was the last Blondie created, and therefore by default the youngest. For the longest time, he considered his other brothers, Raoul especially, as the elder and when they had started their little deviant experiments, Raoul had remained the dominant one. Iason did whatever Raoul had asked, and while it would be dishonest to say that he had not received pleasure from their affair, it was nowhere on this scale.

“Just like that,” Iason moaned as he covered Riki’s hand with his own to help pump his cock. “Oh yes, just like that.”

“Am...I...Better than him?” Riki gasped as he sat up and started to really pound into Iason, thrilled when the Blondie matched him by lifting his hips each time to allow for deeper penetration.

“Who?”

Iason asked, his brain seemed foggy and he wasn’t sure if it was because he was tired from the earlier issues or because he was simply enjoying this so much. There was something so delightfully decadent in having Riki inside of him, something so pure and real and new. Granted, it pricked at his dominant and controlling side, but he pushed back those feelings so he could better appreciate these new sensations.

“R...Raoul,” Riki panted. “Am I...better?”

“I told you,” Iason gasped as Riki hit a spot inside him that sent a surge of ecstasy through his body. Was this what Riki felt when he was penetrated? This glorious ache of pleasure and need? “I don’t remember!” He reached for Riki to pull him close again. “Don’t stop, love. Don’t stop.”

Riki again returned to Iason’s nipples while their hands, now trapped between them both continued their work. Iason seemed to like the tighter friction, moaning his enjoyment, which was unusual, as the Blondie was not overly vocal during sex.

Riki cried out even as he gave one long final thrust and felt his seed explode inside Iason.

“F...fuck,” he moaned trying to gasp in air, and was startled when Iason pushed him off and then suddenly plunged into him from behind before his orgasm even finished. “Ahhh!”

“Sorry pet, I cannot wait.”

“W...was it no...good?” Riki asked, wincing at the dry entry as he tried to hang on to the sheets to keep from being shoved off the bed by the force of Iason’s thrusts.

“It was good, so good, pet. So. Very. Good.” Iason punctuated his last three words with three hard thrust and then threw back his head as light exploded behind his eyes and his body shuddered with the force of his orgasm. “Oh! Oh, Riki! My love!”

He collapsed atop Riki, boneless for the first time in his life. He had never, ever felt such a swift and over whelming orgasm. Initially, he had intended to just let Riki mount him and enjoy the mongrel’s pleasure, but he’d found it so beyond stimulating that he could barely remember what it was he was supposed to be doing. He had been so close to coming a number of times, but he held back wanting, needing to be inside Riki before he released, his dominant side finally taking over again.

With a sigh, he rolled onto his side and gathered Riki close.

“That was wonderful, Riki,” Iason murmured as he nuzzled Riki’s neck.

“It wasn’t enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Big enough. I wasn’t big enough to...”

“That’s nonsense, Riki! You’re surprisingly well endowed for a Human.”

“Yeah, but it’s not king sized, like you or...” Riki tilted his face deeper into the pillow.

“Riki.” Iason lifted the mongrel’s chin so he could see Riki’s eyes and realized that holding back his own pleasure had hurt his lover. “I almost went over several times while you were taking me, but I held back so that I could be inside you.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

“No.” He hadn’t considered Riki would think he was lacking in some way. He pulled Riki into his chest again and caressed his hair. “I have to be inside you when I come, my love.” He kissed the top of Riki’s head. “I couldn’t give that up, I am sorry if it hurt your feelings.”

Riki brooded for a moment and played with some of Iason’s hair that fell over the Blondie’s shoulder and because they were so close, over his as well. “Was it better though? Than with...him.”

“Was it better for you than with Guy?” Iason countered, feeling his irritation grow again and was surprised when Riki didn’t even hesitate in his answer.

“Fuck yeah, it always has been. No one makes me feel the way you do, Iason.”

Iason felt himself instantly soften, and wondered if this was what a boiled pudding felt like? Riki honestly seemed to have no idea how easily his words could affect him. “I can honestly not remember ever feeling like that with Raoul, Riki. It was simply magnificent.”

“Does...does that mean I can do it again?”

Iason chuckled, sleepily. “Perhaps, though not right now. Now is the time to sleep.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Riki asked and nudged Iason with his backside to remind him they were still intimately attached.

“No, I don’t wish to waste time in the morning, so we will stay like this.”

Riki was already starting to drift off to sleep. “What happens in the morning?”

“You promised that we can do it all day.”

“That was only if you let me sleep tonight, which you didn’t, so you forfeit.”

“Nonsense, you’re already half asleep now.” And so was he, Iason realized as he struggled to keep his own eyes open.

Riki started to protest again but he was so utterly relaxed that he didn’t have the energy. “Big baby,” he whispered and let his eyes close.

“I am a Blondie, not a baby,” Iason returned, affectionately as he ran his fingers through Riki’s hair. He loved watching his lover fight back sleep just before drifting off. If either of them were a child, it was Riki.

“Same...thing.”

“If you say so,” Iason whispered and felt Riki’s body relax completely against him, proving the mongrel had fallen asleep. “I do love you.” he sighed and just as he closed his eyes heard Riki whisper a sleepy response. Iason pulled the mongrel even closer in happiness and eventually let himself drift.

Chapter 16

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze wakes up and has to face the consequences of his actions

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone! Thank you so so much for all the great reviews. I am a little nervous about this chapter, it's my favorite so far of the ones I have written so I would really, really appreciate any and all feedback. I cried a little when I read it back to myself, so some of you MAY need tissues prepared. All my love and gratitude!

Ani

Who is that is talking to me? What are they saying? I can't understand what they're saying. My mouth won't open, my tongue feels swollen and heavy. What's wrong with me? Who is that talking? I can't understand you! Can't you come closer? I can't understand you! No! Don't leave, come back! Sweet Jupiter! Is this death? Are the words just memories of my past that mean to haunt me forever, without allowing a response?

Pain! So much pain, inside me, my entire body, I'm screaming but there's no sound. Have I gone blind and deaf or is it that no one could hear me? Can no one could see me? Is this what death feels like, this empty, searching nothing? Am I nothing again, like I was in that apartment with papa. Nothing until they looked at me. Nothing until they wanted me. I don't want to be nothing. Pain! So much pain! It hurts! Help me. Someone please help me!

You're back! Your voice, I can hear you again! Stay with me please! It's so kind, so soothing and so familiar somehow. Please, just keep talking so I

don't have to think about the pain. No! Don't leave me alone, please don't leave me alone in here! I don't care if this is death, I'll be nothing again if only you'll just keep talking! Never stop talking. Please!

That feels good, something wet and cool on my skin. I'm so hot, so very hot, but this, whatever this is feels so very, very good. Thank you. Whoever you are, thank you so much. My skin feels as if it's boiling down to my bones. Where am I? Why can't I see anything and where has that voice gone? I like that voice, please come back. I was just starting to make out some of the words. Were you telling me a story? Oh, please finish the story, don't leave me alone here. Oh, yes, there it is again, the cold wetness now against my face. At least, I think that's my face. Yes, do that, more. Please, give me more of the cold and the wet, I'm so very, very hot.

Katze regained consciousness slowly, reluctantly. The first thought was he was incredibly thirsty, the second was who killed Charlotte? Confused by both, his eyes fluttered open and the first thing he saw was Raoul's face hovering over him.

He quickly closed his eyes again and managed to croak in a rasping voice. "Damn nightmares."

"You're not dreaming," Raoul said mildly and Katze's eyes flew open again. "I am here in all my glory, and I am thrilled to hear that you dream of me."

Katze stared at Raoul, then slowly turned his head to see around the room, which was strangely familiar. This was...this was his condo, his real one! How in the hell? "How..." Was that hoarse sound him? He cleared his throat but that seemed to make the dryness and scratching worse, so instead of speaking again he bolted up in the bed. Almost immediately his stomach rebelled and his head started to swirl painfully.

"Well, that was foolish." Raoul gave him a gentle shove back down. "Lay back, you're just out of the chamber a few days."

"Chamber?"

“The rejuvenation chamber.”

Katze’s hand went to the thin shirt he wore and he gripped the material between his fingers. “Rejuvenation chamber?” Why had he been in a rejuvenation chamber? The last thing he remembered was...was...Oh shit. Oh shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! “Wh...how...did I get here?”

“We brought you here.”

“We?”

“Iason and I, he knew your address.” Raoul poured a glass of water, settled on the bed and handed it to Katze, who drank it greedily. “Easy!” he warned and pulled the glass away from the patient. “If you drink too fast you really will vomit.” Raoul let Katze have a few more sips then pulled the glass back again. “I wasn’t aware your other house was only a temporary one. At least this one is properly furnished.”

Despite the water he’d just had, Katze’s mouth was suddenly and horrifically dry again. Iason? Had Iason and Raoul found him at the warehouse? Had they seen...what had they seen? He couldn’t remember much beyond...He swallowed, hard at what he did remember and felt phantom pains in his ass. The wrist unit on his arm was missing, which meant that at some point his heart had stopped and released the machine from his flesh, as it was wired to his pulse.

The question was, did it stop before Iason and Raoul found him, or after he’d been placed in the rejuvenation chamber. Had Iason seen him as a man, or had the hologram still been intact? He slowly, cautiously lifted the covers and found he was wearing some sort of pajama bottoms. With a shaking hand, he lifted the waist band of the pants and felt himself start to sweat.

“He’s awake.”

Katze’s head shot up as Raoul spoke to the console screen in the corner of the room.

“I’ll be there momentarily,” Iason returned and signed off.

Katze started to scramble out of the bed, only to have Raoul catch him and push him back down. “Let me go!”

“You are still recovering, now lay still or I’ll have to restrain you.”

“He’s coming here! Iason is coming! I can’t let him see me like this! Raoul, please, you have to help me...!”

“I *am* helping you,” Raoul assured and pressed a firm hand to Katze’s chest, pinning the weaker man to the mattress. “You have nothing to be afraid of, Katze.” Raoul pulled the sheets back over him. “Iason wants a report of what happened, and demanded he be contacted the moment you woke. I cannot deny him.”

“I...I know, but...”

“You’ll be fine.” Raoul poured some more water. “Here, drink some more, your throat still sounds raw.”

Katze managed to get a few more sips of liquid past the giant ball forming in his throat.

“I’m very angry with you,” Raoul said, though his voice remained calm, gentle. It wasn’t, Katze realized, the voice he’d heard before. “I thought you knew better than to allow yourself to be put in a situation like that? I thought you were the best at what you did?”

“I...” Katze didn’t know how to answer the charge. He had allowed himself to be distracted and so had missed the signs of the set up, but nothing, not even going through that torture he had just gone through again would force him to admit that it was Raoul himself that had distracted him. “I didn’t see it,” he admitted instead. “I watched and they left, I didn’t see it and they hit me with a charge wand. I couldn’t do anything.”

“Stop talking and drink some more water.” Raoul placed the glass back against Katze’s lips. “I’m not looking for a confession or an apology, I am

merely expressing my concern over the incident.”

“You...” Katze managed to get down some more of the water and had to admit his throat was starting to feel better, his voice started to sound almost normal. “Said you were angry not concerned.”

Raoul immediately leaned closer, forcing Katze to pull back until his head brushed the headboard of his bed. “Anger is a form of concern,” he assured, in a dangerously soft tone, then he lifted a gloved hand to Katze’s cheek, slid his finger down it. “You let yourself get caught and they hurt you, that made me angry.”

“T...then be angry at them, not me.”

“Oh, I was.” Raoul’s face dipped closer so that their lips were almost touching and Katze could not retreat any further. Emerald eyes held Katze’s gaze for several long moments in silence, before finally the Blondie pulled back and offered the glass again.

“What...what happened to them?” Katze asked. “Then men? I’ll recognize them, some of them, I think, so I can take care of them later. Their leader....”

“Is no longer a concern, and nor are his men.”

The cold finality of Raoul’s words helped Katze understand the outcome of the two Blondies finding him in the kidnapper’s lair. He felt no regret or remorse for their deaths, not after what they had done to him.

“I didn’t tell them anything.”

“Did you have an episode? Is that why?”

Katze shook his head, at least he didn’t think he’d blacked out before they took him, and not even during if he recalled correctly, despite what was happening to him. “It was fast and unexpected and then...” He took a shuddering breath. “It just all went to shit.”

Raoul simply stared at him, and then the alarm announcement for his front entrance went off. He handed Katze the glass. "Drink this, slowly." He pointed a finger at Katze. "And don't move from this bed. If you make me chase you, you will regret it."

Katze slumped back against the covers, even as his mind frantically searched for a means of escape. He had an escape plan out of the apartment, that was one of the first things he confirmed whenever he moved to a new place, but he believed Raoul's threat and so he remained in the bed. He took a few more sips of water then set the glass on the stand beside him, dismayed at how badly his hands were shaking. He leaned against the headboard, pulled the covers as far up around him as they would go and willed himself to calm down. Pushing down his anxiety, he schooled his features into a neutral expression.

Iason walked in a moment later. "How do you feel?"

Katze could hear the impatience and a trace of anger in the Blondie's voice and prepared himself for it. This was it, he thought. No going back now, still he managed to conceal any trace of emotion as he lifted his gaze to Iason's. "I'm fine. Thanks for getting me out of there."

"It was an inconvenience I should not have had to bear."

"Yes." Katze glanced towards the window and felt his heart shrink. "I know."

"What were you *thinking*?"

"I miscalculated," Katze said, still refusing to admit he had been preoccupied by Raoul and his own problems; especially with Raoul still in the room. Iason would not care about that, he would only care about whether or not Katze had done the job. "Once I realized the danger I thought I could handle it, but they shocked me and when I woke up I was already bound." He met Iason's eyes again. "I told them nothing. You don't have to be concerned about it, you're still protected, but I..." He pushed back his rising anxiety. "I wasn't careful enough and it could have been

worse, much worse, so if you need to terminate me, or wipe my mind, I'll understand. It would probably be better to..."

"How *dare* you!"

Raoul placed a hand on Iason's shoulder as his brother surged forward.
"Iason. He is still recovering..."

"I blame you," Iason turned his icy gaze to Raoul. "He was never this careless until you started playing with him!"

Raoul blinked, caught between amusement and annoyance. "Well now, that is hardly..."

"Leave us."

Raoul offered Katze a sympathetic glance, then nodded and stepped out of the bedroom.

Katze lowered his eyes and waited for the boom to fall. "I'm sorry, Iason."

"You're sorry? Do you believe that will compensate me for what you have done?"

Katze's head was pounding almost as hard as his heart, yet he maintained his stoic expression even as his hands started to shake again. He slid them under the covers in an attempt to hide them. "I told them nothing. You have every right to be angry, but you don't need to worry about what they know because they know nothing about my connection to you."

"Is that what you think this is about?"

"I vowed to take your secrets to the grave, Iason, and I meant it." Katze's control started to slip as he remembered the decision he'd been forced to make, to take his own life. Wouldn't that have been better, he wondered? Iason was pissed, but now so was Katze because he'd done what he'd promised to do. "I *was* taking them to the fucking grave, until you stopped me!" He slapped his hand over his mouth, appalled to have spoken to Iason

in such a way. He opened his mouth to apologize again, realized it would be useless and snapped it shut again.

“Yes! You very nearly did, damn you, and *that* is why I am so angry!” Iason shot back.

He was furious, so very, very furious with Katze and it was odd because he had never even been angry or really annoyed with the young man, other than that one-time years, and years ago. Only Riki had ever managed to get him so riled up, and now Katze, the idea of it shocked him.

“Then wipe me!” Katze insisted. “I can’t tell what I don’t know and...” He gasped as Iason dropped down on the bed and gripped his shoulders, hard.

“This is not about what you know or what you said! This is about what you *did!*”

“I didn’t tell them anything!”

“Why? Why didn’t you? They were beating you, torturing you! Raoul tells me they even assaulted you sexually!”

Katze flinched, as the full memory of his ordeal came back to him, the humiliation, the fear and the pain of it. He had a brush of panic before he pushed it away. There was nothing left now, was his first thought, now that Iason knew of such a disgraceful thing, but then he remembered Cal, sweet, innocent Cal and how the young Furniture still struggled from his own ordeal. No, he refused to let himself be ashamed of what he couldn’t control.

“I didn’t expect that...” he began, but Iason interrupted him.

“How could you not? These were Remy Andoni’s men, they are beyond scum.”

“I didn’t know whose men they were!” Katze snapped, and again tried to recover himself. “I couldn’t help what happened, I couldn’t stop it, but I didn’t tell them anything. I kept my word!”

“In Jupiter’s name, why? Why didn’t you just give them what they wanted?”

Katze blinked, confused and his emotions finally bled into his expression. “I...I couldn’t....” he stammered. “I wouldn’t! I would never betray you! I promised I would never betray you!”

“But you’ll die? You’ll die to keep my fucking secrets!”

Katze was stunned to hear such language coming from the Blondie. What was happening here? He couldn’t understand Iason being angry about him keeping his vow. “I...had to,” he murmured, puzzled. “We agreed. When we started this, you said...you said I had to take precautions and I did, Iason. I handled it, just like we agreed!”

“Yes.” Iason closed his eyes suddenly and leaned his forehead against Katze’s, which shocked and frightened Katze even more. “I was a fool to ever force you to make such a pledge.”

“No! I wanted to. I would give my life to protect you, Iason. That has never been in question!” He pulled back and met Iason’s gaze, which seemed oddly sad. “Has it?”

“I never meant for you to take your own life.” Even as he said it, Iason knew it was a lie.

Years earlier, he *would* have expected Katze to do just that. Before he had Riki, Iason would have demanded such a sacrifice and it would not have affected him beyond a mild annoyance of having to train someone new. But now, now things were different because Riki had opened feelings and emotions in him that he never knew existed.

When they had burst into that warehouse and he saw his former Furniture and longtime employee lying there, bruised and bleeding he had been annoyed, but when Riki had announced that Katze had no heartbeat, Iason had thought only that his *friend* was dead and he had been livid, perhaps even a little panicked. He realized that Katze meant far more to him than he had first believed, and he didn’t know how or when that had happened.

Was it not these new feelings that had him agreeing to Raoul's suggestion of purging all records of Katze in the system, of, in a small way, allowing him some modicum of freedom? He realized now, that Katze still thought of himself as expendable, when he was anything but.

"What would be the point of keeping you at my side?" Iason asked quietly.
"Of trusting you as I do, unless you are here when I need you?"

Katze blinked, too stunned to speak and felt both relieved and disappointed when Iason suddenly released him and rose to look out the window.

"Perhaps it is my own fault for putting so much pressure on you to be what I needed, that I did not give any thought to what you needed."

"No, I..." What he needed? A Furniture's needs were never considered and he didn't need anything except to be of assistance to Iason. That's all he had ever wanted, from the moment that Iason slapped him with that whip for getting into Tanagura's system files.

He lifted his fingers to the scar on his face and his eyes widened. The skin on his cheek felt smooth. "No," he murmured and put his hand to his other cheek, thinking perhaps he was just disoriented. "Oh no."

Iason turned. "What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

His scar was gone! The scar that reminded him that there he was more than nothing. Iason had proven that when he'd been allowed to utilize and improve his skills. Iason had given him the confidence to be who he was, how he was. It was the first time anyone had really believed in him. His first Master had done what needed to be done for the damaged child he was, but he had still only treated Katze like Furniture. He was grateful to Jaren Nu, but it was Iason who had opened his eyes, and his world to what could be.

"My scar," Katze murmured. "It's gone."

The chamber heals most ailments and disfigurements."

“I see.” Katze let his hands drop to his lap and pushed back the sudden tears that formed in his eyes.

He hadn’t cried in...well, a very, very long time, but for some reason losing his scar hurt him far more than what those men had done. He felt naked without it, as if that one small mark had defined who and what he was. Well, hadn’t it? It was after that mark that he truly came into his own as Iason’s man. And now, it was just...gone.

“Have I truly been such a hard Master?”

“N...no!” Katze head snapped up and immediately repressed his self-pity. “You’ve been a good Master to me, Iason. You...you’ve given me more than...than I ever dared hope to have.” More than he, as nothing, had ever deserved, really. “Everything I have, everything I am, I owe to you.”

“And yet...” Iason’s ice blue eyes bored into Katze. “You’ve been keeping secrets from me.” He watched Katze flinch and pale so quickly his skin almost became transparent and the unusual response shocked Iason, Katze was rarely reactionary. In some ways Katze had the control of an Blondie when it came to maintain a cold facade. “You refuse to share my secrets, seem willing to die to keep them. You are grateful to me, you accept my trust and keep my secrets, yet you are not honest with me.”

Katze knew this day would come, especially as his wrist unit was gone and he assumed that Iason had seen his true form. He thought he was prepared for it, thought he was ready to take whatever judgment Iason decided to pass down, but now that the moment was here, he wasn’t prepared. He wasn’t nearly ready to leave Iason’s side and mixed with the memories of his attack and the loss of his scar... When his eyes welled up again he quickly lowered them, ashamed.

“Why do you look away?”

Katze could only shake his head.

“Have I not told you from the beginning that you must always look me in the eye?”

Katze nodded, numbly.

“Why did I demand that of you? Do you remember?”

Katze wet his lips and glanced at the glass of water Raoul had left on the bedside table. He wanted to reach for it to release the solid lump of sand in his throat, but he was frozen in place. He felt as if he was that ten-year-old child again and had been caught sneaking food.

“You said that truth and dishonesty are held in the eyes,” he stated quietly and was alarmed when his voice trembled.

In truth, Iason had demanded it because during the early years of his creation, few dared to look him in the eye, because at that time he could not contain the color change and it unnerved the other Elites; his brother’s especially. “Have you been dishonest with me?”

“Yes.” Katze’s voice was so quiet now that he wasn’t sure if Iason had even heard him. “I’ll report for termination as soon as Raoul lets me out.”

“Am I such a frightening figure?” Iason asked, almost as quietly. “So terrifying that both you and Cal would assume that I would immediately choose that method because of a situation neither of you could control?”

“Cal’s situation is different, he never lied to you. He never broke the Furniture rules, he...” Katze broke off when the bed dipped as Iason sat down, and firm, gloved fingers caught his chin, lifting his gaze to the piercing blue above.

Iason stared into Katze’s golden, hazel eyes that shimmered with unshed tears, and he realized that he had never seen Katze cry before. Not once, in all their long years together. Then again, he had never seen Katze as visibly shaken as he was now either, and so he would accept some of the blame for that as well. He sometimes forgot that Katze was not an Elite, that he was Human and thus had Human emotions, even if he so rarely showed them.

“You’re disappointed again.”

“Yes.” Iason returned, but he was actually disappointed in himself for not seeing Katze as a person, as a Human instead of a machine. What kind of creature was he before he met Riki that none of these things had mattered? His head began to ache. “Do you truly wish to die, Katze?”

Knowing that Iason would see the truth in his eyes, and unwilling to lie to his Master anymore, Katze could only speak from his heart. “No.”

“You simply wish to leave me then?”

“Never!”

“Then why? Why would you do such a thing?”

“What do you mean? They were your orders and you’re my Master.”

Iason tilted his head. “You still think that? Even though you are a man, essentially living on your own? Raoul has purged your records and you have no visible ties with me. You could easily walk away from this life.”

“No. I can’t.”

“Because you believe me your Master, even now?”

“Always,” Katze stated, finally finding a semblance of his usual voice. “I don’t call you Master and we have no visible ties. We can’t even be seen together unless you are masked, but...” He started to look away again but Iason held his chin firmly, so he met the Blondie’s gaze and continued. “You are now and will always be my Master, Iason.”

“Your Master?” Iason repeated quietly. “But not your friend? Did we not agree that we were also friends when we returned from Avalon?”

Katze opened his mouth, closed it with a snap. “I...O...of course I...I think of you...” Katze took a deep breath and tried to reorganize the thoughts that were swirling around in his head, struggling to find some sort of order in them. “I’ll do anything, be anything you want, Iason.”

Iason’s hand fell away and his expression darkened. “I see.”

“Why are you so angry? Is it...about my keeping secrets?”

“Yes.”

“Then punish me! Do whatever you have to do. I’m prepared for it.” It was the waiting that was killing him, Katze realized. The not knowing what Iason was going to do. “If you don’t want me terminated, then what do you want me to do? I lied to you. I lied to you about what I am, and that can’t be allowed to happen.”

“Do you not believe you have been punished enough?” Iason demanded, rose suddenly and ripped the sheets off Katze.

Katze was startled at first, but then followed Iason’s gaze and saw his foot, the one that Heine had smashed with a sledge hammer. His left ankle was severely malformed compared to the right, indented on either side of his foot, yet he felt no pain from it. “I don’t understand.”

“The damage was too severe to heal properly. The chamber can repair tissue and organs, and simple, clean breaks. The bones in your back could be healed, they were clean, but your ankle was not just broken, it was smashed and the bones very nearly obliterated. What was left has been knit together to offer you some stability, but you will never regain full use of it.”

Katze stared at his new deformity and tried to let the words sink in. “I see.”

Iason studied the young man to see if he would say anything else, but Katze simply seemed to accept his new fate as a cripple. “Why would you do such a thing?” he murmured, pulled the sheets back over Katze and then poured himself a glass of water before returning to look out the window once again. “Why would you suffer through such an ordeal? Why are you so willing to die for it, when I would have dealt with the fallout of anything you told them?”

Staring at Iason’s back, knowing that he had disappointed the most important person in his life, Katze felt something break inside of him. “I...I just wanted you to...” He dropped his head into his trembling hands and

silently cursed. Why was this happening to him? Why couldn't he regain his control?

"Finish it," Iason ordered, quietly.

"Proud," Katze whispered. "I just wanted you to...be proud of me the way..." His heart shattered as he finally recognized the feeling he had for the Blondie, the feeling he'd tried so hard to bury and ignore. "The way my...father never was. You...believed in me, took care of me and let me... be more than..." Nothing. He was only ever nothing. "than he ever did. I just wanted to show I was...grateful. I just wanted you to...be proud of me." He lifted his head again, his eyes still shining with tears he refused to shed. "I'm sorry. I know I'm not worthy of that because I'm only Human, only Furniture. I'm so sorry for having these feelings, Iason. I never meant to."

"No. None of us expected to feel such things." Iason set the half full glass of water on a table and continued to stare out the window for several long moments.

Finally, he turned, walked to the bed and let his hand hover over Katze's lowered head. He paused, then pulled his glove off and dropped his hand into Katze's hair. He could feel the young man beneath him grow very, very still. "I knew, Katze," he stated softly. "The truth about your castration. I insisted on full disclosure from Jaren when I accepted you from him."

Katze's head shot up again. "You...Everything? Even...my father and... and..."

"All of it. Every detail that he knew and whatever else I could learn about you afterwards. I was aware of all of it. I heard your crying in your sleep, sometimes screaming from horrible nightmares, shortly after you came to me."

Katze struggled to comprehend Iason's words. He couldn't remember having nightmares while he was at Iason's! How shameful to have bothered Iason with such a thing! "Why...why didn't you say anything?" Why hadn't

Iason simply sent him back and gotten a Furniture who didn't cry in their sleep?

"I said nothing, did nothing because I respected your privacy." Iason paused. "That's a lie. I did nothing because I had no idea how to help such a damaged child."

"Why didn't you send me away? Why not get someone...?"

"You were fine when you were awake, the perfect Furniture, really, and so I ignored the issues of when you slept, or tried to, and I knew your history and had decided to take you on regardless. I rarely overturn my own decisions."

"But...why didn't you tell me that you knew? Why make me think all this time..." He'd been so afraid, all these years, Katze realized, of Iason learning the truth and he had known it all along!

Iason sat down on the bed again to face Katze. "I had hoped you would tell me yourself, one day, but you continued to keep it a secret."

"I was afraid," Katze admitted. "I was afraid you'd send me away if you knew. I...I mean, it makes no sense why you would keep me when I was..."

"When you were what?"

"Damaged. Shameful. Broken."

"Is that how you see yourself? Is that how you see Cal, what you informed him he now was after his attack?"

"That was different. He couldn't stop that. That wasn't his fault."

"I don't know much about parenting, but I do know that a parent is like a Master, and a child cannot disobey any more than my Furniture can disobey me."

"No, but..."

“Shall I tell you my thoughts of you, after Jaren told me of your past?”

Katze shook his head, unable to speak past the knot that had once again formed in his throat.

“I thought, this one is a survivor. This one has courage and understands what it will take to make his life better. He will be obedient, he will be skilled, and he will be an interesting, conflicting variable in my boringly perfect world.”

Katze gaped at him and actually felt his cheeks flood with heat when Iason ruffled his hair.

“*I am* proud of you, Katze. You have my trust and my respect for all that you have done, all that you have endured in my name. I can never be your father, but in some ways, perhaps, I am not that far removed from the kind of man he was.”

“No,” Katze whispered. “You’re nothing like him. *Nothing*. ”

“I am incapable of reproduction and nor have I desired such a thing.” Iason traced his finger down Katze’s cheek, exactly where his scar used to be and felt the younger man’s stiffened posture soften. “Although, perhaps it is because you were already mine, that the need to speak of such things seemed unnecessary.”

“I wanted that scar,” Katze admitted as he stared into Iason’s eyes. “I cherished it. It reminded me of who I am, what you helped me become.”

“You don’t need a scar to remind you of who you are or who you belong to. You need only stay by my side.”

“By your side?”

Iason rose without answering Katze question, and pulled his glove on again, once more he was stuck staring at Iason’s back. “Your physical attributes are of no concern to me, as you are no longer my Furniture. I had your wrist unit destroyed, you no longer require it.”

Katze felt himself go cold again. “So, you’re...I’m no longer, you don’t want me to...to work for you anymore?”

Iason glanced back. “Of course, you still work for me. Have I not just confirmed that you must stay by my side?”

“But...you just said...”

“By my side, Katze. No more hiding, no more secrets and no more distance between us. You are mine, not Furniture but my aid. You are my trusted associate, and my very good friend. It is time that everyone learned that. Time for you to be proud of who you are and who you work for.”

“I...I’ve always been proud of that, Iason.” Katze stated, he just couldn’t say anything before.

“Good.” Iason moved to the door, pulled it open and paused. “One more thing, You have Riki to thank for saving your life. He recognized what was wrong and told us what to do for you. You should spend some time with him when you are fully recovered. He spent most of this week by your side. I believe it truly frightened him that you almost died, but he never gave up that you would recover.”

Katze watched Iason disappear through the door and found himself completely speechless. Riki? Riki had been here, watching over him? But why? He didn’t understand it! Was that who had been talking to him? Had the voice he had clung to in his unconscious haze belonged to Riki?

Raoul entered and moved to the bed with a medical scanner, which he swiftly passed over Katze’s body from head to toe. “Your blood pressure is too high, lay back down and...” Raoul was startled when Katze grabbed his wrist and yanked him down to the bed.

“Was Riki here?”

“Yes. He came to read to you during the day.” Raoul nodded to the small novel on the bedside table. “Some sort of thriller I believe, or murder

mystery. He left only an hour ago and Cal has also been here, he helped me tend to you in the evenings.”

Cal and Riki, both here at his bedside, taking care of him. But why?

The question must have shown on his face because Raoul answered it. “You may not think you have any friends, but I believe they consider you one of theirs.”

Guilt and remorse over how he had been feeling about Riki lately engulfed him. Atop the conversation and revelations with Iason, he felt ready to fly apart like a thick mist.

“Katze?”

“I...don’t feel well,” Katze said as he slowly lay back and turned on his side away from Raoul.

“I have no doubt.” Raoul rose and pulled the covers back over the younger man. “Just rest. The rejuvenation chamber removed the toxins from your body and healed most of your injuries, but the environment inside them is not made for Humans so you may be feeling ill for another day or two yet.”

“I remember,” Katze murmured as he recalled how sick Riki had been after he had woken from his session. “Raoul?”

“Hmmm?” Raoul, who was about to leave, turned back.

“Can...” Katze swallowed, hard. “Can you just...stay...for a bit? Until I fall asleep?”

“Yes, if you like.” Raoul sat back down on the bed, and was startled when Katze turned towards him and gripped his tunic in his fist.

“Thanks,” the young man sobbed and then allowed himself to do what he couldn’t do in front of Iason Mink, he wept.

Raoul pulled Katze closer so the red-head was almost in his lap, and caressed his back until the Human finally cried himself to sleep.

Chapter 17

Summary for the Chapter:

For those who wanted a peek at Iason and Issac's relationship- and how difficult his decision actually was. Enjoy

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi! I'm so, so glad so many of you seemed to enjoy the last chapter! Thank you so much for the reviews. I wrote this because at some point many of you asked for more info about Issac and Iason's relationship, and I do listen to requests as much as I can fit them in! :-)

I am facing a bit of a corundum at the moment, because as I am writing new chapters, more and more (light-hearted) moments seem to be making their way to the page but they go against the original plot I have for this story which is darkness and death, lol. I haven't yet decided if I will pull back on the dark parts, and rewrite the ending so it fits, or if I should keep the extra chapters for another story. Sigh...I just can't decide! Help! Also, would anyone be interested in a one-shot Christmas story for the holidays and if yes who would you like to be in it? Please send your thoughts to my email instead of adding to comments so I can better organize. animefaemoon at gmail dot com

Oh, and please also review this chapter when you have time! :-) Okay that's all! read on!

Iason stared at the number of reports on his desk and scowled. It had been just over a week since the Eclipse and he'd learned that someone had tampered with his eyes. He was no closer to learning the truth behind that, than he was ascertaining his recently missing time. The one thing he had

managed to come to a conclusion about was that something was very wrong with him and possibly his brothers.

The stack of complaints against Blondies had tripled in the last two weeks, and the usual policy of denial or compensation could no longer be applied. Blondies were the Elites of Tanagura, and some would say of all of Amoï, but every now and then he would receive a complaint about a Blondie's behavior.

As leader of the Syndicate, it was his duty to deal with such complaints, but they were usually small infractions and the complainants were most often tourists or visiting merchants that simply didn't understand life on Amoï and the Blondie's role in it. There were petty grievances, and more often than not dismissed by the complainant once things were properly explained to them. Sometimes a small monetary payment was offered, but it was rare that an off-worlder pushed hard enough for that. The locals knew well enough that pushing on a complaint too hard could get them banned from further business in Tanagura.

Still, the list of grievances this time were far from petty and Iason was uncertain how to deal with them. He picked up the stack of reports, and despite having already memorized them, flipped through them again. Verbal and physical abuse. Property damage. Theft of an employee. Unlawful touching. Causing a scene and drunk and disorderly.

The last one was impossible of course, because Blondies were incapable of getting drunk, and yet the authorities felt the complaint was valid enough to file such a charge. And it wasn't only merchants and others complaining, there were several other Elite's as well who had added their voice to the growing number of reports. Several Sapphires, two Emeralds and a Ruby. There were well known, established businessmen from Midas, casino dealers and a host of others.

If he wasn't absolutely sure they were authentic complaints, he might think someone was trying to pull a wild joke on him.

The suggestion of such a scheme suddenly pulled Iason's memory back to decades before when he was younger. Blondies didn't age of course, he

looked the same now as he had on the day of his creation, but they still went through a process of learning. He'd had a difficult time of it because he was different from all the other Blondies. They looked similar, but each of them were different and unique, though none more than he. Added to that Jupiter had immediately invested more time and attention in him, which had him labeled as her favorite. Jealousy was not only a Human quality, it could be fiercely rampant among Elites as well.

While Iason had never been openly shunned by his brothers, nor was he completely accepted. He received the standard amount of invitations to social gatherings, and they were always very polite and proper, but he knew they gossiped about him. Full conversations would stop when he entered the room and he came to realize that their goodwill was only a surface tolerance, and that they actually loathed and in some cases, feared him.

Except for two, he thought fondly. Raoul, who had treated him like the others at first, but warmed to him after a few years and began to defend him to their other brothers. Iason had never told the Blondie how very much such acts had meant to him then. And then there was Issac. Dear, sweet foolishly idiotic Issac, who also warmed to him over time and soon became his court jester in a sense. Always trying to find ways to either endear Iason to his brothers or to make the quiet, stoic Blondie laugh.

Iason sat back and stared out at the view from his office as he allowed his mind to wander back.

He was reading, as he often did, in the atrium Jupiter kept to house special species of plants, though he knew that Raoul would tease that he was actually hiding. The private Atrium could only be accessed by Blondies, with the exception of an Erat, a short and scaly being who tended to the plants daily. His brothers rarely came in here, as some of the plants were quite dangerous, and they claim they found it suffocating in many ways. Iason, however, rather liked the closeness of the foliage as well as the range of remarkable colours in the room. It was peaceful, with the exception of the small waterfall in the center of the room and the fly-traps never bothered him as long as he remained still and quiet.

Just an hour earlier he'd overheard two of his brothers talking about him to a few other Elites. They often called him Pinocchio when talking to others, a reference to an Earth fairytale that described a puppet who wished to be a real boy one day. Iason understood their cruel intentions behind the name and was annoyed by it. His brothers believed he was Jupiter's puppet with no real mind or will of his own, and the other was another was a reference to what they called his unnatural interest in Human's and mongrels, as if an interest could only mean he actually wished to be one of them.

It was so far from the truth that Iason would have laughed, if he knew how. As it was, a sense of humor had thus far eluded him, as most emotions seemed to. Instead, he decided to ignore their childish slights, and once he made a decision he never deviated from it, but sometimes it still irritated him, obviously, or he wouldn't be hiding in a place where he knew his brothers would not often come.

In reality, he did not wish to be a mortal Human, he simply believed that the best offence was a strong defense, which meant knowing all he could about the Amoians that lived among them, as well as their ancestral Human heritage. They were an emotional, jealous and rebellious species, and as Jupiter had named him Head of the Syndicate, it was his duty to learn how to avoid unnecessary conflicts and issues. He had already compiled a thorough report for Jupiter, with suggestions to curb the Mongrel population as well as remove possible stimuli that could result in thoughts of a revolution. He would offer it at the next board meeting.

"Iason!"

Iason glanced up from his book as a tall Blondie hurried in, his long golden hair was braided at the sides and pulled back to create a handsome wreath-like crown around his forehead. "Hide me!"

Issac hopped over the sofa where Iason sat and dropped down behind it just as the door opened again and their brother Gideon charged in, his usually beautiful Blonde hair was dripping black.

"Where is he?" Gideon demanded.

Iason managed to show no reaction at seeing a Blondie with such hideous hair. Slowly, his eyes lowered to his book again in feigned disinterest. “Who?”

“You know who! I saw him run in here, Iason. Now where is he?”

“I cannot answer your question, until you answer mine, Gideon.” Iason calmly turned the page. Most Elites preferred data books, but Iason liked the feel and smell of a real book over a com screen.

“Issac! Look!” Gideon grabbed both sides of his hair. “Look at what he did to me!”

Iason lifted his head, as if reluctant to stop reading and still his expression remained a neutral. “You changed your hair?”

“He dyed it! The bastard dyed it! He put something in my cleanser that turned it black! Now what am I supposed to do?”

“Can you not dye it back to the original colour?”

“No! Apparently, I must wait for it to wash out, which could take a month! A month! What am I to do?”

“Wear a hat?” Iason suggested and lowered his eyes once again to his book, annoyed that he had lost his place. “Lest you be mistaken for an Onyx.”

Gideon started prowling the atrium, searching for Issac. “When I find him, I shall shave him baldheaded!” He got too close to a Ysteria-Plek and quickly backed away when his hand was almost bitten off. “Why do you come in here? These things are dangerous and should be destroyed!”

“They are only dangerous if you provoke them.”

“Just a nuisance that have no use.”

Iason heard the sneer in his brother’s voice and understood that Gideon was not only talking about the plants, but was also referring to him. He

ignored the slight.

Gideon bent over to peer behind some bushes and was swiftly goosed in the ass by a sneaking, plant vine. He straightened with a squawk and slapped at the blue and green plant. “Nothing but trouble! What is the purpose of Jupiter keeping them?”

Iason watched as the abused plant quickly shuffled across the floor, pulling its large pot along behind it in a thumping-scraping noise, until it reached Iason. The plant seemed to hide behind the Blondie’s legs.

“They’re pretty,” Iason decided as he placed his gloved hand on his lap next to the plant and a small mouth opened from one of the vines to suck on one of his fingers. “And interesting. Some of them sentient. Jupiter hopes to learn from them.”

“What could possibly be learned from a substandard species?” Gideon, frustrated because the plants were continuing to make his search for Issac difficult and he knew the Blondie could probably hide in here for days and not be found, turned back towards the door. “If you see Issac warn him that I shall get my revenge!”

Iason continued to pay attention to the plant beside him rather than reply to Gideon and heard the door swing shut. “I believe you are more troublesome than the plants.”

Issac popped up from behind the sofa and grinned. “Doesn’t he look horrific?” The Blondie carefully stepped over the back of the sofa and settled upon it, sending the now skittish plant scurrying back to his spot deep inside the Atrium. Issac plopped down beside Iason, then stretched out and lay his head on his brother’s lap. “Why don’t you pet me like you did the plant?”

“Because you are neither pretty nor interesting.”

“I’m sentient!” Issac grinned and grabbed Iason’s book. “What are we reading?” He scowled at the formulas inside the book. “Chematics. Boring!”

“They are not boring, they are useful.”

“Can they tell Gideon how to turn his hair back to Blonde?”

Iason sighed and grabbed his book back. “Go be troublesome somewhere else.”

“Come on! It was funny. You didn’t even crack a smile for Jupiter’s sake!”

It seemed to be Issac’s goal in life to make Iason smile, as yet he had not succeeded.

“I do not find the humiliation of a fellow Blondie amusing and you should not take his threat lightly, Issac.”

Issac shrugged, placed his gloved hands over his chest and stared up at Iason from his position on the Blondie’s lap. “Why do you care if he’s humiliated? He says awful things about you all the time.”

“He is free to say whatever he wishes, but he is still a Blondie and your brother. You should show him more respect, Issac.”

“I don’t want to! I know! I’ll pay for a sense of humor for him, for all of our brothers, for Junpein this year! Isn’t that a great idea? One of my best, don’t you think?”

Iason finally looked down to meet Issac’s earnest gaze. Of all the Blondies, Issac seemed the most in tune with his emotions, the most Human. That should have lead him to be despised or shunned by the others, but the other Blondies adored him; even when he was playing pranks on them.

“Does that gift include me?” he asked, finding a strange touch of affection in his voice he never noticed before.

“No.” Issac grinned up at him. “You’re my special project. I’ll make you smile one day and then you won’t be able to stop, you’ll see.” His smile faded. “They make you sad, Iason. I hate them for that.”

Oddly touched by Issac's words, Iason felt a moment of panic as he sensed the switch of his eye colour and quickly looked away. There were times he still could not control it and he knew it made others uncomfortable. He lifted the book to discretely hide his face.

"It is not for you to worry about my state of mind, Issac. Worry for yourself and how one day you may go too far and risk Jupiter's wrath.

"Don't hide it." Issac sat up and pulled the book away from Iason's face, saw the lovely shade of grey that his eyes had become. "I like it, that shade suits you. Not as well as the blue, but it's nice."

Iason felt a strange spark in his brain and almost immediately his eyes switched back to their normal colour. "You..." he began, unsure even of what he was about to say, and then relieved to be rid of responding as Raoul burst in.

"There you are!"

"Eeep!" Issac gave an exaggerated start and quickly clung to Iason. "Save me!"

Raoul stormed over and reached for Issac's arm. "Telsu's looking for you! You were supposed to meet with him for your lesson an hour ago!"

Issac pulled away slid his arms around Iason's neck. "I hate him! He's mean to me! Always scolding me!"

"Because you're lazy and won't do your lessons!" Raoul countered and almost laughed as Iason tried to twist his head and position his book so he could still read with a Blondie wrapped around him. Iason didn't like to be touched, and no other Blondie, no other creature would dare be so familiar with Iason Mink, yet his youngest brother allowed Issac to treat him like a jungle-gym! "If you fail the next test you'll be in real trouble!"

"Don't care!"

“I have instructions to throw you over my shoulder and carry you to class, if I have to, Issac, and I will if I have to.”

“Iason! Raoul is being mean to me!”

“Because you’re being stupid!”

“Iason!”

Iason gave up trying to finish his book, snapped it closed and let it drop onto the sofa, as he patted Issac’s back. “There now. Raoul doesn’t mean it. You are not stupid.”

Issac shot Raoul a sly glance, even as he brazenly adjusted his position so he was effectively sitting in Iason’s lap. “See? Iason cares about me.”

“Yes, yes,” Iason dismissed. “However, you must go to your lessons, Issac. We’ve all had to attend our studies, and there can be no exception, not even for you.”

Issac cuddled closer and for Iason’s ears only said. “I can’t learn it,” he whispered. “It doesn’t stick. Please don’t make me go.”

Iason glanced at Raoul whose expression softened, proving he had heard the confession. As fun and as lovely as Issac was, there was concern regarding where Jupiter may have gotten the organic brain used for him. He did not seem to learn as easily as the others and often had great difficulty with complicated sciences and maths.

“You must go, Issac, but I will make you a deal.”

“A deal?” Issac sat up a little and his eyes brightened with excitement. “What kind of a deal?”

“Go to your lessons faithfully, study hard the rest of this term.”

“And what do I get in return?”

“An education, idiot,” Raoul retorted but his affectionate tone removed any sting from his words.

“If you give Telsu no further trouble, and you pass all your exams, I will take you to Olympus Prime for a weekend.”

Issac perked up instantly. “Really? An entire weekend, just us?”

“No, Raoul will also be going.”

“What?” Issac’s smile turned to a sulking frown. “Why?”

“I have some business there that may require his assistance.”

“But that place is for playing not working!”

“What I have to do will only take a few hours and then the rest of the time you can play to your heart’s content.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Have I ever said something I do not mean?”

Issac jumped up. “Okay! I’ll go to my lessons right now!”

“You have to get a passing grade, Issac,” Iason warned.

“Oh, I can easily get a fifty mark...”

“An eighty or higher is what I consider a passing grade.”

Issac stumbled for a moment. “That is not fair!”

Iason picked up his book once more. “Then I guess Raoul and I will be the only ones playing on Olympus Prime.”

“No! I’ll get an eighty. You wait and see. I will!”

Raoul dropped down beside Iason as the door shut behind Issac. “He’ll never get an eighty.”

“He might if he applies himself.”

“I honestly do not think he’s capable, Iason. I believe Jupiter may have found his brain in a box of hammers on some penial colony.”

“One is not the total sum of his parts, Raoul!” Iason snapped and quickly reigned in his temper.

He was sensitive about those kinds of comments, whether it be genetics, organic or cybernetic materials, such things did not, could not represent the being you were fated to become. Iason was clearly set apart from his brothers. He was aware Jupiter used a different process, different materials with him than She had with the others, though She refused to explain the details of that process. They believed he was defective or dangerous. Believed he was a mere puppet and had no real thoughts or feelings of his own. Iason would prove them wrong, all of them, and he would prove that they were wrong about Issac as well.

“I will take him, even if he does not get an eighty,” Iason decided quietly, because he would know that Issac had at least tried. “He should not be punished or ridiculed for his shortcomings. Despite Jupiter’s attempts to make perfect children, we all have them.”

Raoul was quiet for a long moment, then he suddenly asked. “Do you want to bed him, Iason?”

For the first time, ever, Iason was shocked and it showed. “Of course not!”

“You favor him, let him touch you.” Raoul laid his hand on Iason’s leg and his brother immediately brushed it away. “Why is he so special?”

Iason recovered from his surprise and returned to his usual stoic expression. “Because he is Issac,” he replied curtly, and because the Blondie lifted his spirits when he most needed it. “Why would you even think such a thing?”

“Don’t you feel it, Iason? The need for something more?”

“I feel nothing, as so many of you are often claiming. I am an emotion-free piece of equipment that cannot understand what a real feeling is.”

“Oh, you have them. You don’t show them, but they are definitely there.” Raoul tilted his head. “I have them too. I have more than just feelings.”

Iason was startled for the second time in his life when Raoul suddenly caught his chin and pressed their mouths together. What was this? What in the name of Jupiter was...He felt the stirrings down below and was shocked by it. He, like many Elites, often watched pornographic videos to relieve the basic urges that Jupiter deemed fit to gift them with, and while he as yet had not taken a pet, as was the newly established rule of Jupiter, he could not deny that the urges were compelling to him.

When Raoul pulled back he simply smiled at Iason. “Would you like to explore this some more?”

“I am uncertain what this is,” Iason admitted.

“Nor I, but I cannot deny I have been considering it for some time.”

“Considering what, Raoul?”

“Sex, Iason. Full on, physical sex. With you.”

“Jupiter has given us pets for such things.”

“We cannot have sex with the pets.”

“No, of course not.” The idea of that was deplorable, Iason thought. “Still, physical contact is...”

“Jupiter has not decreed that we could not be together, Iason. Two Blondies, two equals should be able to have a physical relationship.”

“I do not think Jupiter would appro...” Iason’s eyes widened as Raoul placed a hand on his swelling penis. “Raoul!”

“This tells me you approve, and that’s all the approval I need.” Raoul leaned in and kissed Iason a second time, felt the Blondie’s lips soften beneath his. “Say yes, Iason. We both have extensive knowledge of such things, why should we not experiment and enjoy them?”

Iason was tempted, very tempted to agree. He could not deny the arousal that continued to grow beneath his clothes, or the enjoyment he received with Raoul’s kiss. Still, could he trust Raoul to keep such activities a secret? Raoul had been kind enough to him in recent years, and he was grateful to have at least one friend, but this was crossing a line for both of them that could result in a number of troublesome issues.

He stared into Raoul’s green eyes. Lovely eyes, that stayed green and didn’t change on a whim as his own did. He looked down at Raoul’s hands, large, strong hands, and yet they had been gentle when they touched him. Could he do this thing with his friend? With his brother?

“Yes,” he heard himself saying and watched as Raoul’s mouth descended once again.

Iason was startled from his memories as his communicator chimed. He glanced at the readout and smiled. Riki was asking when he would be home. It was so rare for the mongrel to contact him at work or show that he might actually miss Iason.

He replied, soon, and then turned back to the reports, but he couldn’t quite get his mind off the memory he had been thinking of. Since Riki had discovered his old affair with Raoul, pieces of their time together had slowly returned. Iason recognized the sensation for what it was, the fading of a mind-wipe, which would explain why many of the things he had done with Riki had truly felt like a first-time experience. He simply hadn’t remembered the others.

He suspected that Jupiter, who had been furious when She discovered their affair, had tampered with his mind and removed most of the memories of Raoul as his lover. He was not angry about it, it was simply Jupiter’s way, and yet the more he thought about it, the more it concerned him.

Had Jupiter removed the memories as a punishment or out of simple, furious anger? And why had She been so angry. Raoul had been correct in that there had not been a ban on Blondies having a physical relationship, until he and Raoul had done so, and then Jupiter forbade such relationships in the future. As he tried to find that one moment in his memory before Jupiter may have tampered with his mind, he found only a blank space and a hint of pain.

He shook his head to rid himself of it and turned back to his reports.

Chapter 18

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze is recuperating

Notes for the Chapter:

Here is an update for this one. I won't be able to get the christmas story up, as I have had the holiday from hell, but will try and get something up before new years for those still interested. Glad you liked the last chapter, hope you like this one as well! Merry Christmas

**

Raoul entered the rehabilitation wing of the clinic and made his way through to the observation room where he met with the physician overseeing Katze's rehabilitation. His expression remained remote as he stood at the large window overlooking the therapy area.

Katze stood between two padded railings as he attempted to walk down the long, narrow row to the end. Putting any weight on his injured foot was obviously agonizing for him. Sweat ran down his face and bare chest like water, his entire body shook with the effort of each shuffle forward, and yet the black-market dealer continued to push himself forward.

"How long has he been at it?" Raoul demanded and scowled as Katze lost his balance and a medical aid rushed forward. Katze barked something at the aid and waived him away with a flush of anger.

"Almost three hours now."

"Physical therapy is only scheduled for an hour."

"I know, but he refuses to leave the room." Dr. Mason, considered a tall man for his race, still had to look up at the Blondie.

He'd been surprised when Raoul Am had shown up at his small clinic in Apatia and ordered physical therapy for a new patient. While Raoul owned the clinic, most Elites owned the buildings and properties where Amoïans worked, it was unusual for an Elite to come in with a request for treatment for a Human.

Still, he had known Raoul Am for a number of years, the Blondie had been a reasonable and generous landlord, and left the running of the hospital to the administrators. Dr. Mason would have accepted Raoul's request for that reason alone, but when he had seen the severity of the damage on his new patient's ankle, he considered it a challenge.

He shook his balding head. "He's fallen multiple times and most of the three hours he's been in there has been spent with him trying to stand back up, because he won't let anyone help him. I'm worried he's going to do more damage to the rest of his body at this rate."

"Have you tried to sedate him?"

The physician smirked. "Twice. The first time He broke an aid's nose and stabbed the other one with the sedative we had intended to give him."

"And the second?"

Dr. Mason held up his bandaged hand. "The little shit bites!"

Raoul smirked. He enjoyed the physician's laid-back demeanor with him, as few people would speak so familiarly to a Blondie, but the older man had always danced to his own tune and difficult to impress. That was why Raoul had given the money for Mason to open this clinic.

Dr. Mason turned his attention back to his patient on the other side of the glass. "Considering his injury and difficulty walking, the man has unbelievable balance and control of his body when only on one foot."

"I see. So, you called me?"

“You said to call if there were any problems.” Dr. Mason indicated the window. “There’s a big one.”

Raoul sighed. “Prepare a sedative for me.”

“Already done.” The physician handed the prepared syringe to Raoul. “Good luck.”

Raoul turned on his heel, furious that he had been called away from a very sensitive experiment to deal with such foolishness, but he had insisted on being notified if anything went wrong with Katze. He knew that Iason was also incredibly busy and had too much on his plate to be bothered with such nonsense.

He entered the physical therapy room, quietly and calmly instructed the flustered aide to leave, then walked over to the observation window and lowered the privacy screen. “Do you enjoy making me angry?”

“Don’t you...mean...concerned?” Katze huffed and continued to grunt through his attempts at walking.

“Katze, you must stop. You cannot heal in a day.”

“Says you.”

Raoul walked over to him and watched as Katze, despite his near exhaustion and pain, immediately put himself on high alert, pivoting on his good one foot as his hands tightened on the padded railings. “Do you intend to fight me?”

“I’m fine, Raoul. Go away.”

“I will not. You are going to injure yourself further if you continue this...”

“I won’t be a cripple!” Katze screamed at him, and then took the effort to rein in his fear and anger.

He knew he was being unreasonable, but it had been so hard, so excruciatingly hard just to take those first few steps at the beginning of his

therapy. What if he stopped and then couldn't do it tomorrow? What if his ankle became worse overnight and they told him he wasn't allowed to put any weight on it? Where did that leave him? A black-market dealer who could barely walk and couldn't defend himself. He'd be a laughing stock and worse, he'd lose all the respect he had worked so hard to gain.

"You will end this now and return to your room."

"No."

"Shall I call Iason then? Do you wish to disturb him as well with your foolishness?" Raoul's eyes narrowed. "Or is this some ridiculous attempt to redeem yourself in his eyes? He has told you that he is not angry about what happened, Katze!"

Katze relaxed his posture and gripped the other rail as he let his injured foot lay, rather awkwardly, against the floor. "This isn't about Iason."

"Then what is it about?"

"It's about walking a straight line."

Katze's demeanor had gone from hot headed to calm and cool in an instant, but Raoul could still see his body was trembling badly from pain and exhaustion.

"You can do it tomorrow."

"No. I have to do it today."

"No, you don't, and you won't. This is as far as you are going, Katze. I order you to stand down and return to your room."

Katze almost laughed, but a sob rose in his throat. Raoul didn't understand, no one could. His ingrained training warred with his pain and misery. He was grateful for what Raoul had done for him, but still he tried to negotiate.
"One more hour."

"No."

“Just one more and then I’ll stop!”

“You will stop now or I carry you back to your room.” Raoul had the sedative in his pocket but he hoped he would not have to use it. Katze looked physically ill, his skin held an unhealthy sheen of grey. “You can come back in a few days...”

“A few days!”

“Katze, if you overwork yourself you will do just as much damage as that bastard who smashed your ankle. Now do as I say.” Raoul waved his hand and the motion activated hover chair started forward.

“Wait!” Katze held up his hand, desperate.

He couldn’t explain why he was afraid to stop, only that he was. The pain he could get used to, pain was nothing to him, but the nausea and dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him on every attempt to put weight on his foot, along with the uncontrollable trembling of his body was making it more and more difficult to hold himself up, but he couldn’t give up yet. He hadn’t even made it half way down the row yet, damn it!

“To...to the end?” he asked quietly and lifted his golden eyes towards the Blondie. “Just to the end, please?”

“Have you made it to the end yet?”

Katze lowered his head and stayed silent, but he lifted it again when he heard the Blondie move closer. “What are you doing?”

“To here.” Raoul stood between the support bars, halfway from where Katze clung to them, which was about three quarters down the row. “If you can make it to me in the next ten minutes, I will let you walk to the end.” Raoul moved forward suddenly, so his face was only an inch away from Katze’s. “If you don’t make it to me in ten minutes.” He held up the syringe. “You’ll be going down for the night. Understood?”

“I...” Katze didn’t know if he could move that far in only ten minutes. It had taken him hours to get past the quarter mark, and that was after several failed attempts and falls.

Raoul smiled, darkly and leaned even closer to whisper in Katze’s ear. “*And, if you fall again, I will kiss you until you can no longer breathe.*”

Katze’s eyes widened and he almost lost his grip on the support beam. “Why?” he whispered back.

Because I want to, was what Raoul wanted to say but instead, he said only “Incentive.” He had been thinking a lot about kissing Katze again, but he knew it made Katze uncomfortable and that the man would take his offer as a threat and perhaps motivate him more. “Well?”

After a moment, Katze nodded. “But you can’t help me, Raoul. You have to let me do it on my own all the way down.”

Raoul nodded and returned to his former position. “I will not attempt to assist until after the ten minutes are up, unless you fall.”

“Even when they are you can’t...”

“Time starts now.”

Katze glared at him. The bastard! With unsteady arms he pushed himself back into a walking position, took several shallow breaths in, then as he exhaled he slid his injured foot forward and leaned on it.

God! It was excruciating! Such a little thing that had so easily supported him before and now his left leg refused to even let him stand properly. He grunted and forced himself to put his weight on it for a few seconds longer than necessary to make the transition to his right. It was one step, just one step and he was already gasping for air again.

Still, he pushed himself to move his left foot again. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! And back to his right. Tears stung his eyes as he lifted his gaze to the Blondie in front of him, Raoul seemed so far away! Biting his lip hard enough to make

it bleed, he pushed his left foot forward, transferred his weight and crumpled.

Raoul caught Katze before his body touched the mat and pulled him up into his arms.

“Don’t!” Katze turned his head away, ashamed.

“Don’t what?” Raoul asked. “Don’t kiss you?”

“Don’t...” Katze was shivering in relief and had almost no control over his body now that it had been released from the horror of standing. “Don’t...carry me.”

Raoul slowly smiled at the allowance. “Shall I put you in your chair?” Katze nodded abruptly and the Blondie settled him in the hover chair. Raoul crouched, caught Katze’s bare arm and pulled out the sedative, as was their bargain. He watched Katze bite his already bleeding lip and turn away.

“You don’t like needles, do you?” That pleased Raoul for some reason, that he had found such a small, such a Human weakness in Katze’s tough exterior.

“Just do it, already.”

Raoul slid the syringe back into his jacket pocket, rose and put an arm on either side of the chair. “You did well, Katze.”

“I did shit fuck all.”

Raoul caught his chin with a gloved hand. “You did well.” He leaned in close, kept his eyes on Katze’s and saw the flicker of fear in them for an instant, but it was immediately replaced with bravado. Such a brave man, he thought. So very courageous and brave even in the face of such fear, and yet he hated needles.

Katze had been holding his breath, but refused to look away as he waited for Raoul to kiss him and get it over with. He was startled when instead of lips covering his mouth, a soft, white handkerchief was pressed to it.

“You’re bleeding,” Raoul said as he took Katze’s hand and brought it up to hold the handkerchief to his lip. “I’ll take you back to your room.”

“Why...” Katze had started to ask why hadn’t Raoul kissed him? That had been the deal, after all and he wasn’t one to welsh on a deal. He told himself that was the only reason he was wondering, and not because he was in any way disappointed. “You said...”

“I think you’ve been traumatized enough for one day.” Raoul straightened and found it almost difficult to push away from Katze. “Let’s get you back to your room so I can return to my work.”

He should have kissed him, would have just to prove his point, only once he was so close to Katze he realized how very much he wanted that kiss. The spike of need that had chorused through him had been surprising, compelling and worrisome, and so he would wait. He would wait until he could understand what this feeling, what this need was and learn how to repress it, before he crossed such a tempting line.

Katze was silent as Raoul walked down the corridor beside his chair. He didn’t speak, even when Raoul lifted him up and set him back in the bed of his private room.

The Blondie waved a dismissive hand at the aid who hurried in and snatched a white towel off the shelf beside the closet. He walked into the wash area and wet the cloth with cool water, then returned and started to run the cloth over Katze’s dripping face.

“I...I can do that.”

Raoul brushed Katze’s hand away as the man went to take the cloth, then he ran the cloth over Katze’s chest. “Sit up.”

Katze did so and let Raoul wipe the sweat off his back with quick, clinical precision. He watched Raoul step away and toss the cloth on a chair, then open the small wardrobe which held the few clothes that Katze had brought with him from the apartment. He selected a long sleeve, button down shirt in royal blue and returned to slide it over Katze’s shoulders.

Raoul seemed upset, Katze could sense the Blondie's ire in the quick, efficient way that Raoul fastened the shirt over him. He wasn't sure if it was because the Blondie had been called here for such a stupid reason, or because he had basically welshed on the deal they'd made in the therapy room. It had to be the first one, he wasn't so arrogant to think Raoul only got upset over him.

"Can I trust you that I shall not receive another call from Dr. Mason over such nonsense from you?"

"Yes," Katze returned quietly. Yes, definitely the first reason. Shit.

"Good." Raoul gave him a gentle shove back onto the pillow. "Get some rest then."

Katze suddenly felt awkward leaving things the way they were and he felt his stomach tighten as Raoul moved to leave.

"Raoul?"

The Blondie turned from the door. "Yes?"

"You can give me the..." He bit down on the word kiss and swallowed, hard, then told himself to just do it and get it over with. He owed Raoul his life!

"The?" Raoul prompted, patiently.

"The...shot." Coward! Katze screamed silently at himself as he watched Raoul's eyebrows shoot up. "It...it will help me sleep because..."

"You're in pain?"

Katze nodded, that was the truth at least. He sat up again, held out his arm and rolled up his sleeve as Raoul walked back to the bed and pulled out the syringe. Instead of looking away, as was his habit, Katze's eyes remained glued to the needle and where it was about to press into his arm. He was therefore grateful when Raoul's hair suddenly hid the scene from view, as the Blondie leaned forward to administer the shot.

He flinched at the prick of the needle, but then it was over, and before he could change his mind about it, Katze used his free hand to pull the golden curtain of hair back, tilted his head up and touched his lips to the Blondie's.

Raoul was too stunned by the kiss to move or reciprocate, but even within the three point four seconds it took him to recover, Katze was already pulling away and turning on his side away from him. It was hardly a kiss to leave someone breathless, he reasoned, but it was a kiss that Katze had initiated, and that was truly astounding.

It was a full minute before Raoul could force himself to move, to straighten from the bed and step back. He *wanted* Katze, this brave courageous man. This former Furniture. He wanted Katze with a need that threatened to consume him and for the first time ever in his existence, Raoul understood what fear tasted like.

It was wrong and unnatural. Iason had been the exception, and despite his acceptance of his brother's bond with a mongrel, Raoul still viewed such a relationship to be unthinkable. And yet, he *wanted* Katze. He wanted him as Iason wanted Riki and that could not continue.

"What are you doing to me?" he whispered, but Katze did not answer, the black-market dealer was already in a deep sleep from the medication.

Raoul stepped forward to pull the sheets further over Katze, then stepped back again. He had to put some distance between them until he figured out what to do. Things couldn't continue this way. Turning on his heel, he left the room.

Chapter 19

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason gets a new, unsuspected addition to his family

Notes for the Chapter:

One of those light-heated chapters I was talking about. Please don't get angry with Iason's attitude, remember he is an Elite and despite his progress with Riki, some things are simply beneath him and his words are more out of ignorance than malice. ;-)

Katze stepped through the private portal outside the secured hallway of Iason's condo. Iason had contacted him regarding some issues, and so he had discharged himself from the hospital and headed over. He'd refused the hover chair that the doctor tried to insist on, but accepted the crutches as he still could not put any weight on his bad ankle.

They'd allowed him another day of therapy after a two day rest, but threatened him with contacting Raoul again if he went past the hour. The hour had done sweet fuck all for getting him towards the goal of walking properly and he had still been exhausted after it. The dismal life of a cripple had caused him to consider some extreme solutions, such as requesting they cut off his foot and replace it with a synthetic limb, but the doctor refused to do so as there was a chance that Katze would reject the limb and then he would still be missing his foot.

The effort not to spiral into a horrible depression was becoming more and more difficult, and then he got the call from Iason. His Master had merely called for a consultation, but it sounded like Iason had more going on than

he let on. It was enough for Katze to essentially break out of the hospital and head to Iason's for a face to face talk.

He carefully moved toward the condo's door and it was opened before he quite reached it. The surprise of seeing Riki, instead of Cal, on the other side, as well as the fact that the mongrel who was holding a wriggling, black, brown and white mass in his arms almost made him loose his precarious balance.

"Hey!" Riki beamed at him, shifted the animal under his left arm and reached out a hand to Katze. "Look at you, up and about."

"Yeah," Katze ignored Riki's hand and carefully maneuvered himself inside, he was getting the hang of these crutches. "Is that a canine?" He didn't like animals overly much, but he had a secret fear of dogs since he had been bitten on Avalon by one.

"Yep." Riki grinned as the pup squirmed even more at the sight of a new person to lick. "I was just gonna have a smoke, come join me."

"Sure." Katze struggled across the living area and managed to lever himself up the two steps to the balcony. Riki immediately pulled a chair over and he gratefully dropped into it. "What the hell are you doing with it?"

"I got him as payment for a job." Riki suddenly realized he couldn't pull out his cigarettes with the dog in his arms. "Here, hold him a minute."

"No wait, I..." Katze had no choice but to try and contain the squirming mass in his arms as Riki moved to the table to table to grab his smokes. The dog licked up one side of Katze's face and down the other. "Stop. Don't...take this thing back will you?"

"In a minute."

"If it bites me I will kick your ass."

"He wont bite you," Riki retorted as he pulled out two cigarettes, popped them in his mouth and lit them. "Probably." He walked back to Katze and

held one of the cigarettes to the red-head's lips, which parted and accepted it. "How's the foot?"

"Useless."

When Katze realized that Riki had no intention of taking the dog back, he managed to get the little beast off his lap and set it on the balcony by the chair. He set the dog down and watched it happily wag its tail as it sniffed every inch of furniture out there, then took a very long drag of his cigarette, they wouldn't let him smoke at the hospital.

"I can't believe Iason let you have a dog." When Riki remained silent, the older man continued. "Iason does know you have him, right?"

"It's a surprise," Riki defended as he hopped up on the barrier, his usual perch and watched the animal sniff and wander.

"You didn't ask him first?" Katze immediately glanced towards the balcony doorway, and reached for his crutches. "I am so out of here!"

"Wait!" Riki hopped down and stole one of the crutches. "You can't leave now."

"The hell I can't! I am not getting in the middle of the war that's about to rage, I've got my own problems."

"There won't be a war, and why are you even here? Shouldn't you be at the clinic?"

Katze reluctantly sat back, he couldn't get up without both crutches, he looked down as the dog walked over to sniff at his shoes, then tried to climb up his leg. "Iason had some business for me."

"While you're recuperating? You're not even walking yet, why would he..." Riki's eyes narrowed. "He doesn't know you left the clinic, does he?"

"I told you, he had some work for me and..."

“He wouldn’t have asked you to come here in your condition, so...”

“What do you know about my condition?” Katze snapped then reigned in his temper. None of this was Riki’s fault. In fact, if Raoul and Iason were to be believed, it was Riki who saved his life. Katze still wasn’t sure if he was grateful or angry for that fact. “I just needed to talk to Iason. I’ll go back right after.”

“Okay.” Riki laid the crutch back against the chair, hopped back up on the barrier, then lifted one leg and rested his arm on his bent knee. “You can help me convince him to let the dog stay.”

“I am helping you do sweet fuck all.”

“Oh come on, he’s so cute! How can you say no?”

The dog was ridiculously cute, Katze admitted silently, but there was no way he was going to add his voice to this madness. Iason absolutely hated animals, probably due to the preconditioned need for cleanliness that most Elites harbored. He examined his cigarette, which he recognized as his own personal brand. “I’m surprised you have some of these left,” he said, changing the subject.

“I’ve been savoring them, but I’ll need some more soon.”

“You better have something good to trade then.”

The dog continued to try and climb into his lap and Riki grinned as Katze gave up and picked up the whining dog. “You can have him if this doesn’t work out.”

Katze couldn’t even walk properly, and even if he did manage to get back to normal and go back to work, he was so rarely home that it would hardly be a good environment for a pet. “Anything specific you’d like as your epitaph?” he asked as the dog licked his face again and he ran his hands over the animal’s floppy ears. The softness was irresistible and the little beast was wriggling with such happiness that Katze couldn’t help but grin down at it. “Like, here lies dumbass, or something along those lines?”

“How about, 10,000 credits to the person who kills the guy who put me here.”

“That’s too little to murder a Blondie.”

“I meant *you*, asshole.”

Katze shrugged. “You don’t have ten thousand credits, so I’m not worried.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Hmmm.”

Katze continued to pet the dog as he considered what he should say to Riki. Should he thank him for saving his life and for spending time with him when he was still unconscious? It felt weird to do so and he didn’t think Riki would welcome his gratitude, the mongrel was notoriously bashful with any kind of praise or thanks.

He puffed on his cigarette and found the perfect solution. “I can get you another couple of cases, if you want?”

“Yeah? What’s it gonna cost me?”

“Nothing.”

Riki’s eyes narrowed. “Nothing is free, so what’s it gonna be?”

“Okay then, tell me who the hell is Charlotte and why did someone kill her?”

Riki actually laughed. “So, you could hear me?”

“Apparently.”

“I’ll give you the book, it’s better to read it all the way through.”

“Okay.” Katze noticed that the dog had curled on his lap and was starting to snooze. “Where’s Cal?”

“He’s running some errands and...” They both heard the front door open and for a moment, horror was betrayed on both their faces. Katze passed the dog to Riki, when the mongrel dropped his cigarette and jumped off the barrier. “Hey!” Riki quickly tossed the dog back at Katze. “Hold him for me.”

“Shit no.” Katze returned the animal just as quickly to Riki’s arms and grabbed his crutches. “I’m not touching it!”

“You were all over him a minute ago!”

The dog made another air to arm transfer, before Katze could grab his other crutch and barked excitedly at the game

“Shut him up!” Riki’s hand clamped down on the dog’s mouth, even Katze pressed the animal once more into his arms, then snatched his second crutch and levered himself up.

“Can’t do it! I need both arms, see?” He slipped back out of reach as the dog jumped from Riki’s arms and started barking and running around on the balcony.

Iason stepped out onto the balcony and gaped at the animal, shocked. “*What is that?*”

“Iason!” Riki greeted and glared at Katze. “You’re home early.”

“I repeat,” Iason’s eyes narrowed on the silent redhead, balancing on crutches, then back at Riki. “*What is that?*”

“He’s an Earth Canine, they call them dogs.” Riki crouched to get hold of the animal and tried to calm him. “Isn’t he cute?”

“I can see what it is. What is it doing *here*? ”

“Oh, well funny story that. See, I was at work, helping this guy repair a Silicn Movvun Stat unit and once I was done he said he didn’t have the credits to pay me,”

“Riki...” Iason warned impatiently as the dog struggled to get away from Riki and go to the glowering giant in front of them,

“Yeah, so, he didn’t have the payment and said he could pay me in a week when he got his last bids or he said maybe we could trade and I said I’m good with a trade, because I am, and so he took me out back and he had these three...”

“Riki! Shut that thing up!”

“He wants to play!” Riki barked back, but picked up the dog and rose, the animal settled comfortably into his shoulder. “He’s payment, okay. The dog is payment for a job I did.”

“No.”

“Look, I thought about what you said, about Cal needing to feel useful but also needing to be comforted without seeming like he is. Yielo said that animals can sometimes bond easier with people who have trouble getting close to their own kind.”

“This *thing* is for Cal?” Iason knew he should have had that woman shoved in the recycler the moment they returned to Amoï.

“Yeah! Do you think he’ll like him?”

“No,” Iason refused again.

“He might, Cal likes most things and he’s a kid so...”

“It is not staying here. Get rid of it, Riki.”

“Iason, come on!”

“Absolutely not.”

“You promised! You said if I found a way to help Cal...”

“Within reason, this...*This* is not within reason. They are dirty, foul creatures, Riki. I will not have such a mongrel in my home!”

Riki grew very still. “What’s one more mongrel?”

Iason pulled back, realized he was treading on very shaky ground. “That is entirely different, Riki. You are...were a Human pet, and this is...”

“This is *my* pet,” Riki decided in a very low, very quiet voice. “You brought me here, made me yours against my will...”

“Riki...”

“You trained me, tortured me, fed me and clothed me, at least on occasion.”

“Don’t do this.”

“Why can’t I do the same for this animal? Why can’t your *pet* have a pet, Iason?”

Iason knew he had lost the argument but wasn’t quite willing to give up just yet. “If you want a pet we will get one of those lizard things again. Something that doesn’t make noise or chew things or urinate on the furniture...”

“Something you can keep in a cage, like you kept me.”

For fuck sake, was Iason’s first thought and the brutishness of it surprised him. He *had* been with Riki too long. “You really want this...this thing?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Give me one good reason.”

“I told you, I got him for Cal.”

“You just said it was *your* pet.”

“Yeah, he is mine, but I got him to keep Cal company, to give him something else to take care of and focus on when he isn’t doing his other shit, which he could do with his eyes fucking closed. Now can I keep him or not?”

No, was what Iason wanted to say but he could see that Riki was determined. And it was so very rare that Riki ever asked him for anything, so how could he refuse? His head hurt, damn it. He had too many other things going on right now than having to deal with this.

He looked at Katze who was being surprisingly quiet. “What are you doing here?”

Katze moved forward, carefully, prepared for the Blondie’s anger. “I wanted to help with your investigation.”

“You’re in no position to help anyone, now go back!”

“I don’t need my foot to work a terminal and make some calls, Iason. Let me help you.”

“When you are fully recovered you can...”

“I might never be fully recovered, so why wait?” Katze moved slightly closer and attempted to take on the stern stance he usually used when trying to intimidate other dealers; not as effective obviously with him balanced between two metal sticks. “You need me, so use me. You said I still worked for you, so let me do my job.”

Iason looked from Katze to Riki, irritated to find himself feeling trapped by his mate and his employee. He rubbed his aching forehead. “Fine, you can set up in the office.”

Katze held back his relieved grin, kept his expression neutral as he handed the remains of his cigarette to Riki. “Are your codes the same?”

“Why would I change them?” Iason snapped and then his gaze studied the crutches Katze was balanced on as the man moved towards him. “Katze...”

He suddenly had a vision of the black-market dealer bloodied, naked and broken on a stone floor and almost moved to pick Katze up and carry him to a bed. However, he remembered his frustration when he had been unable to walk and had to depend on others and so he stepped out of the doorway to allow Katze the independence he required, but watched until Katze made it all the way across the living room and disappeared into his office.

“Iason?” Riki began, fully aware the Blondie’s concern for Katze. “I really think it...”

“It does not go in the kitchen, my office or our bedroom.”

Iason hadn’t even looked at him when he spoke and Riki’s temper spiked again at so many restrictions. “May as well keep him in a fucking crate...”

“Riki!” Iason spun back and glared at the mongrel. “I mean it. Those are my terms and they are final.”

“Fine! I’ll keep him out of your stupid bedroom!”

“Our bedroom,” Iason corrected as Cal entered the condo and stepped down into the living room. The dog jumped out of Riki’s arms, bolted through Iason’s legs and headed straight for the younger man.

“*What* is that?” Cal asked appalled as the animal tried to crawl up his leg, his usual stoic exterior completely shattered by the shock of it as he dropped the bag of groceries he’d been carrying.

Riki hurried inside. “It’s a dog.”

“A...Aren’t they extinct?”

“I guess not all of them.”

“B...but why is it here?”

Riki rolled his eyes, Cal and Iason were two peas in a pod, he decided. He stepped forward and picked up the dog. “He’s our new pet.”

“A pet?”

“Yeah, of the four-legged variety, but I don’t think we should bring him to any pet parties. People might misunderstand.”

Cal looked from Riki to Iason, as he struggled to regain his composure. “Are...I mean, is this really going to stay here with us, Sir?”

“Apparently,” Iason returned grimly, but he was watching Cal’s reaction to the animal very closely. “What do you think of it?”

“Him,” Riki growled. “The dog is male.”

Iason ignored him and continued to watch Cal as the young man bent to pull his groceries back into the bag “Well? Do you think it will be too much of a burden?”

“Oh, well, no. I...I don’t think burden is the word.” As Cal was crouched down, the dog eagerly licked his face, which had Cal quickly standing up again. “He’ll... need to be trained, so I will do some research and...”

“He has to sleep with you,” Riki stated and watched Cal’s eyes widen.

“With *me*?”

“Iason won’t let him in our room and if we leave him to wander the place he might tear things up.”

“O...oh. That, yes that’s true. Um... Very well, I’ll arrange something for him in my room then.” Cal shot a slightly desperate look at Iason, but then quickly covered it up when Iason simply nodded to Riki. “Okay then. A bed or blanket or something, well let’s go find you a bed then, um...” Cal looked at Iason again. “What’s its name?”

“His. I have no clue what to call him. I’ll leave it up to you.” Riki flashed Cal a quick grin, grabbed his jacket and moved towards the door, before Cal could manage a reply. “That’s great, takes a load off my mind. Iason and Katze have a meeting and I have an appointment. I brought a collar and some other stuff, it’s in the kitchen. You’ll have to figure out what kind of

food he eats.” Riki moved to the door, narrowly avoiding the hand Iason swiped towards him. “Be back later.”

Cal’s eyes widened Riki left then turned back to Iason.

“Katze will be staying a few days so open up the guest room,” Iason stated. “We’ll be in my office, hold supper for a couple of hours.” Iason turned on his heel and headed for the alcove that housed his personal communication system.

Cal watched his master disappear into the room with something akin to horror, then looked down at the animal who had wandered over to the sofa and started to lift his leg. “What are you...Oh no! Nononononono!” He rushed forward scooped the pup up in his arms and hurried to the balcony where he almost dropped it. The dog sniffed around, then lifted its leg against the barrier and proceeded to urinate.

“Um...if you must do that, you have to do it out here, or...” Should he walk it, he wondered? Maybe that would be best, but first he supposed he needed to figure out what to feed it. “Do you like vegetables, or do you...um... prefer meat? Grains perhaps?”

The dog wandered back to him and happily wagged his tail, even as Cal stared at the wet spot on the barrier. He’d have to clean that up as well. How did one train a dog?

When the dog gently nipped at his foot he glanced down. “Well, first thing’s first. Let’s...um...” The dog stretched on his hind legs and hopped against Cal. “No. Now, stay down. You mustn’t do that.” Cal pushed him off but the dog simply jumped again. Cal crouched and pushed the animal back down and into a sitting position. “No jumping. It’s very improper and...” Of course, the moment he straightened the dog jumped again. This was not going to be an easy task.

Glancing back at the spotless floors inside, Cal resigned himself and picked up the squirming animal. “No, now stop,” he insisted as the dog licked his face all the way across the living room. “No licking, no jumping and no urinating inside. You need to listen to...Gah!” The dog’s manic tongue got

inside his mouth. “Oh, dirty! That’s so...” He set the dog down in his room and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “No kissing! Absolutely no kissing.”

The dog seemed to grin at him, raced around the room, then crouched and shit on the floor.

Chapter 20

Summary for the Chapter:

Guy and Shiao are taken back to the Chief's village

Guy rolled his neck, which had grown stiff from sitting for so long on an uncomfortably hard surface inside a small hut in the Dakfurian village. While he had certainly sat and slept in some uncomfortable places while living in Ceres, he wasn't used to sitting in one position for an extended period and the small woven mat beneath his ass did nothing to block the cold, hard floor beneath.

When they had first come to this planet and Shiao had explained that the current inhabitants lived in the trees, Guy had expected an under-developed race one step up from an Amoïan Desert Monkey, but he had been very wrong in his assumption. Even after their rather intense first meeting, he had not considered them worth his time, but as the hours, or perhaps it had been days by his calendar, flew by, his opinion changed.

There was no computer technology here. Absolutely no signs of a growing metropolis or enterprising industry, no factories or energy mines. Not a single tall building or sky scraper, no processing plants or anything that remotely resembled what he knew as life on a planet or in a city.

And yet, he felt that to say that these creatures were any less advanced than the people on Amoï would be an injustice. The people here seemed to use and understand every one of the planet's surrounding resources, but unlike what had happened on so many other planets, they did not over use or ravenously consume. He had learned, just through a few brief conversations, that the Dakfure used only what they required to live, and whenever they used a certain amount of a resource, they were very careful to replenish that resource as soon as they could.

There were structures of all shapes and sizes, built into or around the mammoth tree trunks, as well as staircases, some with vertical steps down

to neighboring branches and others circular that appeared to wind all the way to the ground and then back up the tree into the clouds above. He suspected they did not go to the ground though, but remained several meters above to avoid the dangerous animals below.

The homes were all one story and held what he learned was a fire spout in the center of the roof. Instead of wood or leaves all the roofs and accompanying overhangs, where the locals gathered to eat or talk or rest, were covered with that same rubbery material their cloaks were made of; to deflect the lightening from storms as Shiao had explained earlier.

There were no vines here, like the ones he had swung on and climbed down on his earlier adventure and much of the foliage and lower branches had been turned into benches to rest upon, hang cured or drying meat and places to store food and other perishables. The canopy of the trees was several meters above, so high it almost appeared like a shadow or cloud in the sky and apparently protected them from most of the heavier rain and wind, yet still allowed for them to get a good deal of sunlight and moonlight.

In essence, what Guy had thought of as a backwards, primitive people were actually intelligent and resourceful beings that lived simply and understood nature in a way that escaped most others. After the fight on the mounds, where he apparently proved his worth, the tribe had immediately accepted him.

He and Shiao were brought back to the village and invited to dine with them in what appeared to be a communal dinner, where everyone sat outside over a wide overhanging branch that sheltered them from the weather, and shared the multiple dishes spread across a low, rectangular table, within everyone's reach from those seated cross-legged on either side of it.

There were no food processors, no plates or utensils. Instead, they used their clawed fingers to pull roasted meats, dripping with delicious animal juices from the bone and feasted on an array of fruits and leafy greens. There were several clay pitchers, with narrowed, rounded tops, on the table that held crisp, cool water, and when you were thirsty, you simply reached

for the pitcher and drank from it before offering it to the person on either side of you.

Another thing that Guy had noticed in the time he had spent in the village was that the natives had little use for clothing and only wore their leather wrappings and cloaks when they were around off worlders. In fact, what trappings they did wear were simple leather cloths around their nether regions of the males and females, because fur or hair basically covered everything else unless you looked very close.

Guy had never seen so many females in his life time, outside of the porn magazines and videos he and Riki sometimes managed to barter for. These women did not have human skin or features, but they were most defiantly female, and with their breasts basically exposed and those long, slender tails poking out of their ass, he'd found himself growing embarrassingly aroused at first. Luckily, he had calmed down before he offended anyone.

Shiao had briefly advised him that the Dakfure had been hunted nearly to extinction and so were very untrusting of other races. Guy felt rather proud that they trusted him enough to show him their true forms as well as invite him to live with them, but he was also beginning to suspect that Shiao was much more than just an old acquaintance of the species. Everyone treated the Elite with a show of respect that bordered on reverence. It was similar to how people treated Blondies on Amoï, but on a more joyous level.

When they had first arrived many of the tribe came up to greet him, touched his arm, his shoulder, or crouching before him and exposing their tails. Guy thought they were encouraging sex, but Shiao explained that it was a gesture of immeasurable trust and submission for the Dakfure. While they had invited him here, no one had deliberately exposed their tail to Guy yet, so he knew he still had a long way to go to earning their complete trust.

Even the young ones hurried up to Shiao and Guy was surprised when the Onyx allowed several of them to jump onto his back or hang from his arms as he held them out from his body. They treated Shiao like a climbing tree and the Onyx didn't seem to mind it at all. Several of the excited kids tried to pull Shiao away from the other adults, but after a light growl and hiss from Thu'grth they scattered back into the trees.

Thu'grth, by the way, was apparently a female, and Guy had been stunned at the strength and skill the Dakfure had displayed when they were fighting earlier. Apparently there was almost no division of the sexes in their society, both males and females were responsible for construction, hunting, fighting and rearing the young ones.

Shu'grth showed Guy a tree house inside their village that they would use so they could be under the protection of the tribe. It was a house that had been built specifically for Shiao when he visited, so was noticeably different than the others, with specific modifications to make the Onyx comfortable. It was large on the inside and the ceiling was well over nine feet, to give the Shiao plenty of room to move around.

An enormous bed was built into the walls of the house, and covered with a thick downy mattress and colorful woven blankets and cushions, as were the benches in what Guy assumed was a living area. There was no kitchen, as the tribe usually ate together so that everyone received the same share of food.

The house did have a private washing area with a large tub and could be filled by a reserve of water that came from large clay barrel, balanced on a high, outside branch just over the roof of the house caught rain water. The barrel was attached to a selection of what looked to Guy like gutter eves or pipes. A pull from a lever inside the bathroom, tilted the barrel outside and released the water into the pipes. The pipes were attached to the back side of the house, and then bored through the wall just over the tub, so the water could drop directly into it. The water could also apparently be heated by a small pitted hearth just beneath the tub.

Guy had noticed there was also something that resembled a toilet, which was apparently a very new feature of the house as some of the clay was still drying around the sides of the addition. For him, he wondered, as Elites didn't have the need to release waste from their system, only mongrels like him did.

Thu'grth explained that the washroom was created for specifically them, as the tribe bathed in the Lock Pond, which was made of two enormous, hollowed out branches that had been coated with a mixture of mud and sand

to create a seal for the water to stay inside. The water came from the sky, so more rain water Guy assumed, and it was used for communal bathing.

After dinner they were immediately brought to a decorative one room house, with no furniture. Here, among walls adorned with torchlight and a variety of hand carved and painted emblems and artifacts sat a half dozen Dakfure cross-legged around a circular fire in the middle of the floor.

Guy learned that Shu'grth and Thu'grth wore universal translators on their wrists, obviously a gift from Shiao, which was how he could understand them at the mounds, but now they seemed to have disconnected them as he could not understand the sounds they were currently making as they spoke to each other.

He and Shiao sat just outside the circle, also on the floor, and closer to the entrance way. The Onyx had been ominously quiet during their few hours in the village, and when Guy had attempted to ask the Elite what the others were saying, Shiao simply said hush and turned his gaze ahead again. Guy was unsure why, he wondered if Shiao was angry with him because he had left their hut initially, or because he had insisted on fighting. Whatever the reason, Shiao obviously wasn't ready to forgive him yet.

Shu'grth suddenly lifted his hand and everyone fell silent. He engaged his translator and turned to Guy. "This female you have seen that holds our likeness and markings, where did you see her?"

"On a planet called Avalon, she was with a friend of mine."

"Was she his captive?"

Guy scowled. "No, I don't think so. She was helping him, they seemed, you know, close."

"Fel'yshi," Shu'grth spoke now to Shiao with the name that the tribe had given him so many years ago, meaning Honored Friend. "Why did you not speak to me of this upon your first arrival here?"

“I did not make the connection,” Shiao returned calmly. “It was believed that you were all that were left of your kind. I searched the stars for decades with your grandfather, Shu’grth, and we could find no other survivors. Also, the female has similar Dakfurian traits, certainly, but she also appears to be partially Humanoid.”

A flurry of murmurs rose from the seated group.

“You said she looked like us!” Thu’grth hissing at Guy. “Have you spoken against what is true?”

“No!” Guy assured quickly. “Look, I’ve never seen anything like her before, until I saw you with your masks off. She looks like a...well what we call a cat, like you all do, and she has a tail and fur, or hair or whatever it is.”

“How can this be if she can appear as you do?”

“I don’t know what she is, but yeah she can look like us. She can also look like all of you. I don’t understand it any better than you do, but that’s the facts of it. I have no reason to lie to you.”

“Her features are similar but not altogether the same as the Dakfure,” Shiao stated. “Her face is more flat, more Humanoid when she is in her animal form, it remains the same with the exception of the hair, whiskers and teeth. Her nose does not protrude as yours does, and her ears are far smaller in her animal form. She also appears to be covered in stripes whereas you all have spots, so I did not see a connection to the Dakfure.”

“You noticed all that, huh?” Guy muttered. “I thought you didn’t like women?”

“I have never made such a statement,” Shiao returned, missing the spark of jealousy in the mongrel’s eyes, or perhaps simply not recognizing the emotion. “I like women as much as I like men, they are equal in my eyes.”

“Then why have sex with a man?”

“It was offered. You agreed. Why...?”

“You fucking asshole!” Guy rose, angrily and stormed out of the hut.

Shiao sat there for a moment, blinking in perplexed confusion. He didn’t understand why Guy was upset?

“Fel’yshi,” Shu’grth began quietly. “Go after your mate. We will discuss this information and wait for your return.”

Mate? Guy wasn’t his mate, he was...What was he exactly, Shiao wondered? “I apologize,” he said as he rose gracefully from the floor. “We’ll return shortly.”

He stepped out and found that the sun had set and torches had been lit around the village to hold back the darkness. He looked in both directions but did not see any sign of Guy, but as he stepped down onto one of the cross-ways, a young Dakfure hurried up to him and took his hand, tugged.

“Did you see where my friend went off too?” he asked in their language.

The child nodded and tugged on his hand again. Shiao followed the youngster down a set of circular stairs, going around twice before the child jumped off and raced to a high swinging branch. He pointed as Shiao caught up to him and the Onyx smoothed a hand over the boy’s mane.

“Thank you Far’tha.” Shiao climbed three steps that were carved into the branch then stared at the wide bench that was suspended by strong vines to make a swing. There sat Guy, his shoulder’s hunched, his eyes staring up at the stars.

“Go away,” Guy said the moment he heard Shiao step onto the platform that held the swing.

“I will not.” The Onyx settled beside him, and because Guy had kept the bench motionless, he used his long legs to gently start it rocking. “I have upset you.”

“What was your first clue?”

“You called me names and ran away.”

Guy rolled his eyes and sighed, he hadn’t expected an actual answer, but Shiao didn’t often get sarcasm. “So, you know, now get lost.”

“I cannot get lost. I have a self-modulating direction system.”

Guy shook his head. Sometimes he wondered if Shiao was really that obtuse or he said things like that just to get a rise out of him. Maybe it was a mixture of both. He was obviously completely oblivious as to why his comments had been hurtful, and because Guy understood this, he decided to explain it.

“Why did you notice so much about that girl?”

“It is in my nature to notice things.”

“Yeah but...” Guy crossed his arms over his chest, willed himself not to look at the Elite. “Did it make you horny?”

“How could it? We were in the middle of fighting an army of Vilipshine.”

“But you still noticed her!”

“Guy, I also noticed how many of the guards had weapons, how many were not Vilipshine and how many times you were struck!”

Guy blinked. “You...you noticed how many times I got hit?”

“Nineteen, in total, not including the blaster that finally put you down.” Shiao touched his hand to Guy’s cheek. “You held up remarkably well under the assault, yet I became angry over each and every one.”

Guy turned to him, enjoyed how pale Shiao’s features were in the moonlight in contrast to his jet-black hair. “You did?”

“Yes. It was difficult for me to concentrate on my own task, as I was very worried about you.”

“I can take care of myself,” Guy replied but found he was immensely pleased that Shiao had felt that way about him. “But, I appreciate the concern.”

“Concern?” Shiao shifted so he could be closer, until their faces were merely inches apart. “Was it concern, Guy?”

“Wasn’t it?”

“I don’t think so.”

Guy’s eyes closed even before their lips touched and he felt his earlier anger and irritation simply melt away. He loved Shiao’s lips, his mouth was wide and full and cool, and so damn talented. When they finally broke apart, Shiao understood Guy needed to breathe at some point, he said. “I will look only at you, from now on, if you wish it, Guy.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Guy grinned, hearing Shiao repeat the slang word, the Onyx only ever used a formal affirmation. “I...I guess looking’s okay, everybody looks, just no touching. Okay?”

“Why would I wish to touch another when I have you?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Guy slid his arms around Shaio’s neck. “You keep thinking exactly that.”

Shiao smirked and tapped Guy’s nose. “You are a pushy mongrel.” He rose suddenly and pulled Guy with him. “We must return, there is still much to discuss.”

“Did I do the wrong thing, Shiao?” Guy asked, worried. “Telling them about that girl? I mean, you said there might not even be a connection. She might be something totally different.”

“I believe the truth should always be spoken, Guy. Secrets and lies only cause pain and suffering in the end.”

“But do you think she is a Dakfure?”

“I do not know. As I said, those here were thought to be all that had survived. She can look as a Human would, that is certainly not in their genetic makeup.”

They stepped down to the main area and headed for the winding staircase.

“You don’t think they’ll hurt her, do you?” Guy had already betrayed Riki, twice. He didn’t want to have another one on his conscience. “I mean, Riki seems close to her, you know. He’ll be pissed if...”

“The Dakfure are generally a peaceful people, Guy, however if this woman is of their ilk, they must investigate it. When I told you that they are the last it was the truth. All that you have seen here is all that is left of their species.”

Guy came to a halt, startled. While he had not seen everyone in the village, there couldn’t be more than a hundred or so people here, and only a handful of them were children. “All?” he gasped. “What about other planets? What about...”

“They are the last.”

“Well that...” Guy felt his gut twist in sympathy. He had watched programs about extinct animal species at Guardian, but he hadn’t really understood the full concept of it when Shiao originally explained it. “That really sucks.”

Shiao put his arm around Guy’s shoulders as they started up the wide stairs. “It certainly does.”

Chapter 21

Summary for the Chapter:

Bean and The Shadow

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so very much for the great reviews. I am so glad you are still enjoying the story. And for those who didn't like Bean before...read on :-)

Bean put the finishing touches on the meal he had prepared for his new Master and left it outside the secured room on a table to the side, as he had been instructed to do. After they moved into the new apartment he had been informed that the south facing room was restricted and he was never to go inside, as it was where his Master made preparations for their goal.

Knowing that once his Master was inside the room he would not be required for the remainder of the evening, he returned to the kitchen and quickly ate his own meal, before taking out a raw pheasant that he intended to make for lunch the next day. He selected the carving knife and started to carve out the pieces he didn't need.

His new Master had not seemed concerned about the recent murder that Bean had perpetrated on his behalf. As he had been Furniture such behavior should have been beyond his capabilities, yet his new Master seemed to enjoy this darker side, perhaps had even been aroused by it for he had petted Bean in the vehicle all the way back to the new apartment.

He had responded to his Master's question about killing a man with the answer he perceived his Master wanted to hear, however, killing that trader had meant absolutely nothing to Bean. It was not even the first time he had killed.

At a very early age, thrust into the grim, sometimes brutal life of Guardian, he understood that his only loyalty should be to himself and he would do anything, be anyone to get out of there. He had suspected he was incredibly intelligent, and while he had no memory of his time before Guardian, he understood enough, even at three and four, to ingratiate himself with the administrators by being a helpful and obedient child.

It was because of this that they allowed him to test for the Furniture program, which consisted of extensive exams that analyzed intelligence, obedience, range of cognitive functions, problem solving, emotional stability and a host of other things.

He passed the tests with flying colours and, in fact, learned that he had the second highest score in the history of the entire program, only one boy had tested higher, and that had been several decades before Bean was even born.

At first, it upset him, and he had tried to coerce the name of the boy who seemed more intelligent, but the teachers refused to give it to him. As he knew pushing would go against the nature of Furniture and be a mark against him, he let it drop. He did, however learn that it had not been just a few points higher, but nearly double what his own score had been. He let it go, because was enough to know that he had beaten everyone else.

It was while he was waiting for the official notice to take him away to his new life, that a new boy came to Guardian. Bean couldn't even remember the kid's name now, that's how unimportant it was, but what had been important was that the boy brought with him a toy car that apparently his mother had given him. It was very rare for children to be left with any keepsakes, once they had been given up to the orphanage, and if they were, the administrators quickly took them away; stating they had to let go of their old life.

But the head administrator had developed a soft spot for this new boy and so had let him keep the toy. Other boys were jealous of course, but the administrator had made it clear that no one was to harass the boy or they would all be punished.

Bean didn't like the look of the boy, who was too pretty, too soft and cried far too easily. He had been the administrator's favorite before this new child had come, and it didn't make sense to him that he could so easily be replaced by something so soft and weak. Also, he had never had a toy before so he had coveted the little car. By his way of thinking, the youngster should have given him the toy freely, as the child had only been four, whereas Bean was already almost six and essentially the child's elder, also far more important and intelligent, and therefore deserved a gesture of respect.

The day he received notice that he had been accepted into the Furniture program, he made his move. Pretending to go to sleep with all the other boys that night, he actually stayed awake until almost two the following morning. During that time, instead of patrolling the halls as they were paid to do, the caregivers, he knew, would all be smoking or drinking downstairs, or some would have roused a few of the older boys to service them and would be in a dark room somewhere on the higher levels away from the administration offices.

Having left his bed often during this time, he did not require a light to see by as he'd slipped from his bed, and walked down the rows and rows of cots and across the hall to the next room which held the younger children. The new boy had fallen asleep on one of the many cots, clutching his toy car, and it was almost too easy for Bean to pull the worn, nearly flat pillow out from beneath the new boy's head and place it over the child's face.

There had been a momentary flinch, as he recalled, or perhaps it was just a jerk of movement when the brain realized that it was being suffocated, but then the boy lay still again. Bean held the pillow in place for a full fifteen minutes, counting out the time in his head, just in case, then pulled it away, took the toy car and walked out into the barren corridor.

The orphanage was locked down at night, but thanks to his closeness with the head administrator he knew the access codes, so he walked straight to the front door, unlocked it and deactivated the alarm. In his bare feet he stepped outside and walked up the hill, away from the orphanage, to the one large tree that remained in the barren area.

He climbed the tree, also something that was forbidden, and went as high as he could, then pulled a small cloth bag from the pocket of his torn jeans and dropped the car inside it. With a good, secure knot, he tied the bag to a branch, well out of view from anyone standing below. Everyone would be searched the next morning once they found the dead boy, and when they picked him up for training, he would not be able to take anything with him to Tanagura. He would leave the car there and come back for it.

After climbing back down, Bean returned to the orphanage, reset the locks and engaged the alarm, then returned to his bed and dropped into a sound, dreamless sleep. The following morning had been even better than he had predicted, for the administrators had assumed the new kid had simply died in his sleep as he had apparently been ill with some rare disease.

Boys were still questioned of course, for form since the car had gone missing, and their one small cubby hole searched, but the car was not found and everyone confirmed that they had been asleep and so couldn't have had any part in the child's death.

Later that morning, he had been permitted to leave for his new assignment as Furniture. He'd returned less than a year later to get the car, and it was still, he realized, in his things at Iason Mink's condo.

This apartment was not as luxurious as the condo his former Master had owned, and that annoyed him because as he thought of that, he once again started to obsess over everything he had lost, however his new Master afforded him far more freedom. The Shadow, as his Master had become known, didn't seem to have much use for Furniture in general, aside from cooking, cleaning and assistance with the odd errand.

The household accounts were usually a Furniture's responsibility but the Shadow dealt with them himself, as he did with any incoming and outgoing communications. Any and all purchases were automatically purchased online and sent to the apartment, so Bean did not have any reason to go shopping.

His Master preferred to dress himself, and Bean had still not even seen his face, but he had been Furniture long enough that he could recognize The

Shadow was an Elite, he just couldn't tell what kind. His Master always wore a hooded cloak and mask outside of his secured room.

Bean didn't really care who The Shadow was, he only cared about getting his revenge on the Pet who had left him to be attacked and assaulted in that filthy place. Those waiting in the area he had been dropped off had not hesitated in hurting and humiliating him, but after they had nearly raped and beaten him to death, they'd left him to die where he lay.

But he didn't die. His hatred and rage had kept him alive long enough to crawl away and find a small unused surface room, which was little more than a metal box next to an incinerator plant and had been outfitted with a worn, ratty mattress and a heater that worked sporadically. It had obviously been abandoned but its previous owner, and so Bean claimed it for his own.

An old shirt had been left behind and he tore it into strips to staunch the bleeding on his arms and leg, then he tied a strip like a bandana around his forehead to hide the Scren mark that Riki had given him.

He slept intermittently through the night, managed not to freeze or bleed to death, then found the strength to crawl out and make his way to a more populated area of Ceres. He did what he had always done, and adapted to his environment. Keeping his head down he moved discretely in and out of the stores, as he tried to find a way to palm some medical supplies or food. Bandages and ointment were apparently rare here, and food seemed almost as scarce, but beyond that the shop keepers kept such a straight eye on him that there was no opportunity to steal.

Finding an abandoned knit cap in the road he quickly pulled it over his head to hide his scar, then had been propositioned by one of the owner in the next store he walked into. Bean had explained he was hungry and needed medicine and bandages, but he had no money. That apparently wasn't a problem, as the man requested something else in trade.

After several oral favors, and for once grateful that he had received such training as a Furniture, Bean managed to get what he needed. He returned to his box but found that someone else had already poached it. He tried to reason with the young man, who was probably in his teens, but the youth

quoted the mongrel rule of Claim and Respect; once a site was claimed by someone, no one had the right to enter or claim that place until or unless the current inhabitant left the site.

He had been, beaten, dismissed, used, abused, raped and humiliated. He had lost his coveted position as Iason Mink's Furniture, had been thrown out of Eos and demoted to a Scren, which was less than a mongrel. He was not about to give up his new sanctuary, as deplorable as it was, especially considering what he'd had to do to get the few supplies he'd carried.

So, he had walked off, pretending to obey the rule, and waited until night fell. As soon as he was sure the boy had fallen asleep, he crawled inside, bashed the mongrel in the head with a rock, then pulled him out and dropped him into the bucket of one of the plant's incinerator droids as it passed.

After crawling inside, he ate some of his precious food, then wrapped and treated the rest of his wounds as much as he could. There was nothing he could do about the mark on his forehead, so he would have to keep the cap on at all times, at least until he got the hell out of Ceres. It angered him that his perfect skin had been so badly marked, because it meant he would never be Furniture again.

He'd spent most of that night, kicking the heater to get it to start again, and making plans to get out of Ceres. Finally, after he had managed to fall asleep, he woke to find two looming men standing over him and they physically pulled him out of his little box. When negotiation didn't work he tried physical violence, but they had gotten him nowhere, and soon he had been sedated and bound.

He woke up on a transport that was apparently headed for a mining colony and for the second time in his life, he felt true fear; the first had been when the Pet abandoned him in Ceres. Were they pirates? Slave traders? Why had they taken him, when there were much stronger mongrels to pick from? How had they even known where he was? Pretending to be asleep, he overheard one of their communications, and he recognized the voice. Katze! Iason's right hand man. Had Iason sent these men after him? But

why? He was already humiliated, punished and abandoned in Ceres, what would be the point?

It bothered him that it was Katze who had basically signed his death warrant, because the black-market dealer had been good to him when he first came to work for Iason. Katze had shown him just how Iason liked things done and Bean had been grateful for it. He tried to reason that Katze would have had no choice but to obey Iason, but then he wondered if it had even been Iason who had given the order? Perhaps it had been Riki who had given Katze the order, the Pet obviously had undue influence over his Master. If it was Riki, then Katze had also betrayed him.

His fate changed once again, when he had been registered to the mining colony and had spent his first day working in the mines. Several of the men had taken an interest in him almost immediately. They'd never had such a pretty worker and they made Bean pay for his good looks. They used him much worse than the mongrels had, and Bean had fought them every step of the way. He managed to hurt a few of them quiet badly before the colony guards had broken up the attack.

He had been whipped for insubordination, and each strike had cemented his hatred for the mongrel that had started it all. Afterwards, he had been sold to the two men who had eventually brought him to his new Master, and he had agreed to do The Shadow's bidding to further his own agenda; which was to find and kill Riki the Dark.

Realizing he was spending far too much time reminiscing when he should be working, he glanced down at the pheasant he had been preparing to find that he had accidentally butchered it to small pieces while lost in his thoughts. Well, that wouldn't do. He tossed the mutilated bird into the recycler and started collecting ingredients for a pasta dish.

The Shadow sat in a high back chair in his darkened office, his back was to the door. He knew that Bean would not dare enter, yet still he wore the heavy cloak and hood that he had become his new signature. On the wall of monitors, most showing previously recorded footage, Iason Mink worked in his office, or spoke to security outside his condo in Eos. Other images showed Iason talking to Raoul, and several others of the Elite out and about in Tanagura.

The monitor that the Shadow was most interested in was the current live feed, which showed Iason Mink, his tall, beautifully pale body fully exposed under a cascade of water as the Elite stood in the shower. Long, incredibly golden hair glistened with moisture as Iason added a dollop of shampoo and slowly started to wash it.

The Shadow's black gloved hand slid beneath his cloak as Iason tangled long, lean fingers through his exquisite hair then levered his head beneath the shower spray to rinse the perfumed lather. The Shadow watched the soap slide down the Blondie's gorgeous body and the hand beneath his cloak started to move more vigorously.

If only there was sound, he thought, and watched Iason turn to face the hidden camera. It had been so easy to set up the surveillance equipment, thanks to his benefactor, but there had not been time to add audio and he was regretting that now.

Iason suddenly smiled and the Shadow grunted as his hand increased the speed of which he gripped his cock. Yes, he thought, just like that. Smile just like that, it was almost as if Iason was smiling at him and it brought him nearly to the brink of orgasm, but just as he was about to go over the edge, his dream was shattered.

The mongrel pet stepped into the shower and Iason pulled the man against him for a deep slow kiss. The Shadow's free hand curled into a fist as they kissed and then Iason Mink, the top Blondie on Amoī, poured the special shampoo into his hand and thread it through the pet's hair. No! The shampoo was worth a small fortune and to waste such a product on a filthy mongrel was inconceivable!

The Shadow growled as Iason began to touch the pet, finger the pet and then penetrate the pet. His hand beneath his cloak moved even faster, even as his other hand started pounding angrily on the arm of the chair. He found his released as the couple on screen found theirs, and then he picked up the wine glass from the table beside him and threw it at the middle monitor. He rose and walked closer as red wine streaked down over the images of Iason and the mongrel, it reminded him of blood and he slid a gloved finger through the streaks.

“Soon,” he stated quietly.

Chapter 22

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason is woken by a furry surprise and later by a cry for help.

Iason woke immediately as something dropped onto his chest. His eyes flew open and stared at a ball of fur seated beside him on the bed and two large brown eyes staring at him.

“How dare...” he began sitting up and the object that had been on his chest fell into his lap. His eyes widened as he grabbed it up and examined the thoroughly chewed white boot. It was one to his favorite pair! “You’re dead.”

The dog took off running out of the room but Iason was close behind, even as he took a second to grab his robe from the hook on the wall. He shrugged into as he chased the wicked four-legged animal down the stairs, across the living room and through the kitchen.

“Come here you miserable beast!” he hissed and made a grab for the dog but the animal darted into Cal’s room behind the kitchen. Iason straightened and started to toss open the door, but stopped when he heard the pitiful whimpers inside.

“Stop! Oh please stop! It hurts!”

Iason quietly pushed the door open and his keen night-vision eyes took in the small sitting area opposite a small bed, and the distressed form in the bed, squirming in sleep as if trying to outrun something horrible. He had thrown off his sheets and continued to thrash about, his long limbs seeking some sort of defense against an enemy that wasn’t there.

“Help! Help, me please! Master! It hurts!”

Iason spotted the dog again as it hopped up and carefully crawled across the bed, as if unwilling to startle Cal. The animal inched forward and then lay his head on Cal's panting chest and gave the boy a small lick on the chin.

Cal stopped thrashing, but continued to sob and murmur in his sleep. The dog whined and continued to gently lick at Cal's tears until finally Cal turned over on his side and tossed his arms around the dog. He curled into a fetal position, trapping the animal between his chest and his knees, but the dog didn't seem to mind and snuggled even closer as it whined again.

"I'm okay," Cal said, obviously still half asleep as he cuddled the dog. "I'm okay. It's okay, boy. Sshhh."

Fascinating, Iason thought as he watched the animal and Cal both settle down and drop back to sleep. Perhaps Riki's idea was a good one. Cal was either not fully awake or too busy battling the remains of his dream to even realize that Iason was in the room.

The young Furniture was getting big, like Katze, he realized. Hard to believe the child had only just turned fourteen. A bigger bed was definitely needed, as Cal already took up most of that small single. He'd arrange for one to be brought tomorrow, he decided, as he closed the door and returned to his room.

Entering his chamber, he turned and secured the door, then removed his robe and placed it back on the wall hook. The bedroom was still in darkness, so he set the lights to ten percent, and noticed that his lover was still face down in the bed, dead to the world and had not moved at all since he'd fallen asleep.

He moved to the platform bed and very carefully pulled the covers off Riki, neatly folded them across the bottom of the platform mattress, then reared his hand back and brought it down, hard, across the mongrel's bare ass.

Riki yelped and swung over on his back, holding his ass with both hands as he looked up at a furious Iason Mink. "What the fuck?" he demanded and scrambled to sit up in the bed, still not even completely awake yet. He

became fully alert as a very naked, very angry Blondie crawled across the bed towards him.

“What do you think this is, Riki?” Iason asked in a dangerous tone as he reached for his ruined boot and almost shoved it up the young man’s nose.

Riki chewed the inside of his cheek. “Um...b...before I answer that, what are the chances it will end up in my ass, either way?”

“Fifty- fifty.”

Riki swallowed, hard and tried to regroup as he looked past Iason to the bedroom door. “I closed the door, Iason. I swear I did!”

“Then how did that thing get inside? Can it pick locks? Reprogram codes? Is it actually a Chinz from the Planet Mzar and can slide through walls?”

“N...no, he’s just a dog. I guess, well he must be pretty smart...” Riki began and flinched when Iason’s cold eyes narrowed on him. “I...I’m sorry. I’ll buy you a new pair!”

“That is not the point!”

“He’s still just a puppy! He doesn’t know any better but...” Riki glanced around suddenly, realized he didn’t see the animal in question. “Um... where is he?” His eyes widened when Iason remained silent and he worried the Blondie had made good on his threat. “Fuck me, you didn’t...you didn’t kill him did you?”

“I considered it,” Iason returned, looked down at his ruined boot then threw it across the room in disgust. “I very well might have if it hadn’t taken refuge in Cal’s room.”

“Oh, God! You didn’t take it out on Cal, did you?” Riki sat up, his earlier anxiety turning to anger. “I brought the dog in! If you’re gonna punish someone, then punish me, for fuck’s sake!”

“Oh I will,” Iason returned, darkly. “And I did not hurt Cal. In fact, it seems your theory may have been valid. The boy was having a nightmare and the

dog seemed to offer him a some form of comfort.”

“He was? He did? That’s great! What did the dog do, exactly? We should...”

“Riki,” Iason announced as he again leaned closer, cutting off Riki’s tirade. “As I cannot take out my annoyance on the perpetrator of the crime, or the person set to train said beast, you will have to be punished in their place.”

“Now look, I...”

“As you said, you brought the dog in.”

“Yeah, but that...that was because I didn’t want you to hurt Cal! Iason, it’s a dog, things like this will happen so...so...”

“So?”

“So...have a little patience, will you?”

Iason pretended to consider it. “No. I will have no patience with the beast or with you. Turn over.”

Riki had the feeling he was about to receive some more stinging blows to his already sore ass. He hated being spanked the most, it hurt, was humiliating and horrifically enough, it sometimes stimulated him, which was even worse.

“Turn over, Riki. I will not tell you again.”

Desperate to avoid the punishment, Riki suddenly lunged forward, grabbed Iason by the ears and kissed him.

Iason remained motionless for a moment, stunned. Riki rarely initiated a kiss. Still he allowed Riki to continue, enjoying it while still plotting on getting his hands on Riki’s bare ass.

“Don’t be mad,” Riki asked when he finally broke the kiss. “I’ll let you do me, so don’t be mad.”

“Let me?” Iason mused. Riki had no choice in the matter, if he wanted to take the mongrel he would. “Turn over,” he ordered, darkly.

Riki shoved Iason backwards so the Blondie ended up sprawled across the mattress on his back, then he moved to take Iason’s cock in his mouth.

“Riki!” Iason was annoyed that Riki was disobeying him, and yet he was also enjoying the mongrel’s aggressiveness. He closed his eyes and slid his hands through Riki’s dark hair. Fine, if he wanted to do this first, they would, but Riki would still get spanked. “You’re only delaying the inevitable.”

Riki stopped, sat up. “Come on. I’m not a kid. I’m not even a pet anymore, so why do you get to spank me?”

Iason propped himself up on his elbows and considered Riki’s, irritably valid argument. “You accepted responsibly for the dog. The agreement was that if it does something wrong you will be punished.”

“Fine, but not spanking! I fucking hate it, Iason. I really hate it.”

“You are not supposed to enjoy a punishment, Riki.”

“Think of something else! I accept responsibility but be reasonable!”

Iason sighed and wondered when negotiation had become part of their relationship? He lay back on the bed again. “Continue what you were doing and I will consider an alternative.”

Get out! Get out now! Run!

Iason blinked awake the cry entered his head and thought he heard someone screaming. He sat up, looked down at Riki who was once again asleep, having negotiated his way out of punishment with some very inventive sexual favors.

He carefully slid out of the bed and reached for his robe again as his eyes scanned the room. Someone had spoken to him, it had not been a dream. The hall upstairs was quiet, so he moved down stairs, scanned the living area and dining area, library and his home office. The balcony doors were closed and secured for the night. He entered the kitchen found it dimly lit for safety purposes. Cal was still curled up with the dog, both sound asleep.

“How odd,” he said aloud and wondered what it could have been and why he had this strange feeling of anxiety growing inside of him.

He ascended the stairs again and opened the door to their room, Riki was still asleep in their bed. Down the hall he opened the guest room, formerly the pet room, and saw that Yeila was not asleep, but instead standing by the window and staring out. She turned to him, her eyes wide.

“Did you hear it?”

Iason took a step inside. “Hear what?” he demanded, wondering if they had heard the same thing or if she was playing some sort of trick on him. Had she been the one that sent him that message? Did she have the ability to speak telepathically as well?

“So much pain,” she whispered as tears streamed down her face, and suddenly her legs collapsed. “So much anguish!”

Iason moved to her, crouched down. “What was it you heard? Who’s pain?”

She shook her head, regretfully. “I can hear their cries, their screams. It...” She covered her ears as if it would block out the memory of the sounds but it could not. “They are dying. So much death. So much destruction.”

“From what?” Iason demanded, catching her arms and shaking her. “What is it you saw?”

She continued to shake her head. “I know not if it be a dream or reality. I know not if it be from this time or the next.” Her head shot up suddenly and her body started to glow green though Iason felt no pain at touching her. “It is coming.”

“What is? What is coming?”

“Maku!” she gasped and then collapsed, unconscious.

Iason shoved her away and ran back to the bedroom he shared with Riki. He burst through the door, startling the young mongrel awake.

“What?” Riki asked, drowsily, even as he was tightly enfolded into Iason’s strong arms. “What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

Iason didn’t know what was happening, but he felt a foreboding unlike any he had ever felt before. “Riki,” he whispered and held his lover tighter. “Riki.”

It was the sound that caught their attention, the keening, unfamiliar whine of an engine that caused them to look towards the outside energy field that hid their private life from view.

“Lower privacy...” Iason began just as the vehicle burst through the barrier. Iason wrapped his body around Riki’s and pushed him to the floor.

Riki heard the whine, and then the static burst of the breaking energy field that stood as the walls of their condo. The thunderous roar of thrusters, a screeching sound of tearing metal, the clinking of shattering glass and then the horrific tightness in his stomach as they dropped. Something hit him, he didn’t know what, but he didn’t even have the chance to cry out as they were falling a second time, and then a third. Pain! Nausea! He couldn’t breathe! And then, darkness.

When Riki awoke his entire body throbbed like one giant ache. It was so quiet, so terrifyingly quiet. He opened his eyes but couldn’t see. He closed them, tried again, but still there was only darkness. He started to push up.

“Don’t move,” Iason ordered.

“What happened?” Riki asked, alarmed that he still couldn’t see. “Why is it so dark?” His leg ached and he started to shift it.

“I said don’t move!”

Riki grew still again. “It’s dark,” he whispered, because he really couldn’t see anything, not even Iason’s pale face in this pitch blackness.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“You do not remember?”

“No I...no, wait. Yes, there was a sound...something...something hit us! Something came through the field and hit us.”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“Some sort of vehicle.”

“But vehicles aren’t permitted in Eos except in the market place!”

“That is correct.”

“Then how...”

“I do not know,” Iason returned, but vowed he would learn. He would turn the universe on its ear to find out who would dare do such a thing to him.
“Are you injured?”

“What?”

“Are you injured?”

“How the fuck should I know? You won’t let me move!”

“Well, your mouth seems unaffected.”

“Oh, ha ha, laugh it up, you overgrown toaster. How did we...” Riki suddenly heard something drop, then something skitter. And was that... what was that creaking? He had thought it was dead silent when he first

regained consciousness but he was wrong. There were sounds, only he couldn't specify what they were and that was even more frightening. "Gimmie blue eyes."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That light, with your eyes! Do that thing with your eyes so we can see."

"I do not believe that would be prudent."

"Fuck prudent, I can't see!"

"That is for the best, Riki."

A wave of cold passed over Riki at Iason's words. What did that mean? How bad of a situation were they in? He tried to think back to the crash. There was light, and then heat and then...what? What else...He started to shiver. Falling. They had been falling, several times they had stopped and started to fall again. The only thing he could think that would cause such a sensation was...

"Riki?"

"A...Are we trapped under the condo?" Had the entire building fallen on them? The walls were energy fields, but the platforms, floors. Balcony and interior structure such as shelves and cabinets were made of solid materials.
"Are we under the building?"

"I believe we are in the recreation area, the lowest level of our condo. The safety protocols would have engaged to protect the lower floors."

"You believe?"

"We fell some ways, Riki. I can only stipulate at this point." Iason suspected had they been crushed beneath all the floors of the building they would both be dead. And he saw something resembling their pool table when he first opened his eyes after the fall.

"Oh holy shit! Cal! Yielia! Where are they? Are they trapped? What..."

“I do not know. To my knowledge they were in their rooms.

“How far...how far did the thing go?”

“I cannot be certain.” Iason grunted slightly. “Let us discuss something else, something more calming.”

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“I am uninjured.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Iason. Are you hurt?” When the Blondie refused to answer, Riki started to lift his arm.

“Riki! You cannot move!”

“Why? Why can’t I move, Iason? Tell me why or turn on the fucking lights!”

Iason was silent for a moment. “The rescue team will have been dispatched. I am sure they are now, at this very moment, working to retrieve us.”

“The light, Iason.”

“I do not want you to be frightened, Riki.”

“Then give me some fucking light!”

Iason’s eyes started to glow and the soft blue light spread out from them, pushing back the darkness and revealing the true horror surrounding them. Enormous, broken mounds of plaster, furniture and glass was everywhere, on all sides of them, including right above. Jagged metal pipes and sparking wires were mixed among the debris and it was then that Riki realized he was mostly untouched by the carnage.

Careful to only move his head he saw Iason hovering directly above him, the Blondie’s hands were on either side of Riki’s body, right next to his elbows, while Iason’s body stretched over his, not touching; but protecting.

It was as if the android had just finished a pushup, with only his hands and his feet touching the ground.

Riki's eyes traveled upwards and filled at the sight of the two enormous beams cris-crossing Iason's back as well as a giant chunk of plaster that seemed levered across his shoulders. The Blondie's body was the only thing preventing them from being crushed. Iason's clothing had been shredded and for each piece of pale white skin that was exposed there was almost as many dark, oozing gashes. His face was nearly black, as was his hair, from the dust and dirt that had fallen atop them.

"No."

Riki started to reach for Iason, then realized why he couldn't move. His hand might hit Iason's arm and even a slight change in balance would mean the end of them. "What did you do? How...?"

"I did what I had to do. Now you understand why you cannot move." Iason was struggling, in fact he could not recall a time that he had expanded so much effort to hold his position. He had felt something break in his back, but he couldn't run a diagnostic to check for damage because every single resource was going to keeping his arms and legs locked.

"If...if it's too much just let it go, Iason."

"No."

"It's okay." Riki wasn't afraid of death, but he realized that the options of how he died, being crushed when Iason's strength failed, or suffocating from lack of oxygen, were grim.

"I will *not* allow you to die, Riki." Iason made this vow, but knew he could not keep this up indefinitely and when his arms failed him, he knew that they would both be crushed under the rubble. He might survive, but Riki would not and that was what frightened him most. A life without Riki was no life at all for him anymore.

Riki saw the determination in Iason's gaze and loved him more for it. He didn't know how long they had been buried or if anyone even had a clue where they were. All he could be sure of was that Iason's arms were starting to tremble and that the Blondie was suffering and in pain.

In that moment, he let go of all his pride and past resentments, started to lift his arms and slide them around Iason's neck.

"Riki! I told you not to mo..."

"It doesn't matter," Riki whispered as he held onto Iason's gaze. "We're together. I'd rather go together anyway."

"Oh Riki," Iason began, filled with such love he didn't even feel the weight on his back for a moment, but then he felt something wet on his cheek. "What...what is that?" Dear Jupiter was there some sort of fuel leak as well? Would they be burned alive before they were crushed? "Is something leaking? Is there a burst pipe above us?"

Riki carefully swiped his thumb across the Blondie's cheek in stunned amazement. "You're crying, Iason."

Iason blinked and for a split second they were in complete darkness, but then the blue glow returned. "That is impossible. Blondies are not capable of crying."

"But you are." Riki watched, astonished as another tear fell from Iason's other eye and felt his own eyes well up. Seeing the pure anguish that his death would cause the Blondie, witnessing such proof of Iason's love caused a contented peace to settle over him. "Let go, Iason. I love you. Let go."

"I love you so very, very much, Riki."

"I know you do. I still don't understand it, but I know."

"Riki. I don't want to be without you." If Iason shifted his weight and managed to survive while Riki did not, he would be devastated. "I *cannot*

be without you.”

“Then let go.”

“What if it doesn’t kill me?”

“Then I’ll come back and haunt you for the rest of your fucking life.” Riki smiled through his tears, hoping to whatever God might exist that Iason did survive, but if they died together, that was okay too.

Iason could not have held on much longer anyway, but he managed one last shrove against the debris on his back so that he could at least have that few seconds to wrap his arms around his beloved. He closed his eyes and waited for the crushing weight to hit them.

Notes for the Chapter:

SORRY about the cliffhanger. I couldn't resist and I've been soooooo good about it lately. :-) Please remember to review, your comments are my inspiration!

Chapter 23

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and Riki wait to be rescued

Iason had braced himself for the crushing weight of the debris, but it never came. He started to lift his head from the crook of Riki's neck, but then the mongrel spoke.

"Don't... move," he whispered, returning Iason's own words back to him, but he sounded like he was in pain.

"Riki?" Iason managed to lift his head just enough to see a greenish-blue glow surrounding them. The debris was only inches from his face, held in check by a frighteningly thin field of blue light. "Are you doing this? How are you doing this?"

"I...don't know," Riki whimpered even as his arms tightened around Iason. "Really.... heavy. Hurts."

"Then stop. I am ready to die with you, Riki. As you said, it is okay."

"No. Want... more," Riki murmured, panting as it hurt to speak. His body was on fire, as if searing hot flames were peeling away layers of his skin one agonizing layer at a time, while an oppressive weight pushed down on him from above. "Not...goodbye...yet."

Iason's chest tightened with pleasure and fear. "What can I do? How can I help you?"

Riki didn't know how Iason could help because he still wasn't sure how he was creating the field. His final thought as Iason embraced him had been he wanted more time. He wasn't ready for his life to end yet and from that thought a fire started in his chest that and grew and spread through his body, as this field grew and spread around them.

Riki felt tears flow down his cheeks unchecked but he was afraid to move and wipe them away, afraid to shift or blink or do anything that might alter their protection in some way. The terror of not knowing how he was making the field was as real as the terror of accidentally stopping it.

“Iason...I’m scared.”

Iason grew angry at the idea that his beautiful, prideful mongrel was forced to admit to such a thing. It was tantamount to Riki acknowledging he had finally been broken, and while Iason had spent years trying to do just that, hearing those words from the young man who had suffered through everything a Blondie had tried to do to him, through every torture and manipulation and outside interference, made his chest ache and his fury burn. Whoever was responsible for this would die, he decided. He would kill them with his very own hands for making his beloved feel this way.

“I am here, my love.” He clamped down on his own emotions in an attempt to offer support to Riki. “I am right here and I will do anything you ask of me, but if it hurts too much then you must stop.”

Iason wouldn’t have given up, no matter how much all that tonnage may have injured him, he wouldn’t have let go but for Riki’s decision to die together. He couldn’t have held back the debris much longer, it had been 2.6 hours since the collapse and waiting for Riki to awake up had felt like an eternity.

Riki’s heart beat had been strong and his breathing even, so that had helped Iason keep from losing his mind altogether, but when the mongrel finally regained consciousness and then suggested he give into their fate Iason had been fully prepared to do just that. Now, however, their fate was in Riki’s hands and Iason needed to help him face it.

“Tell me...tell me you...love....me.” Riki whispered, and despite the pain and situation he was in, still managed to feel the flutter of embarrassment at his request. Yielia and the Queen had both told him his power ran on love, though he didn’t see how that was possible. He knew very little about that particular emotion, but if it was true, maybe hearing Iason talk about it would help.

“I do love you, Riki.” Iason returned softly as he carefully dropped his head so their cheeks touched once more. The wetness on Riki’s face would have broken his heart, if he’d had one. “I have loved you almost from the moment I first saw you. You were so brave and undisciplined and handsome and wild and I had to have you. I have never felt this way about anyone. You are my one and only love, Riki. Forever, beyond death, beyond anything the universe holds. You are my one, my needed part for full completion.”

Iason noticed that as he poured his heart out to Riki the thin glowing field around them seemed to expand and thicken. Were Riki’s powers growing just from his words?

“More,” Riki murmured, his eyes tightly closed as he refused to think of the situation they were in, refused to acknowledge his embarrassment or his pride and just felt the love Iason was offering him. He had to move the debris off them, had to protect them and Iason’s words seemed to be helping. “More, please!”

Iason continued telling Riki everything he loved about him, everything he adored about the time they had spent together, every moment of every thought he had ever had that revealed his love for the mongrel. It felt odd at first to speak things he felt were unnecessary, for Riki should already know his heart.

But as he continued to speak because he had felt Riki’s tears, and suddenly he came to a startling realization. Had the mongrel truly never understood or believed the incredible depth of Iason’s feelings for him? Even after all they had been through together? Determined to make Riki understand, to make him believe in case this was their last moments together, Iason continued to reveal every feeling he had ever had, every moment that he felt was precious between them.

The power of his own words had an unsettling effect on the Blondie. To say so much, to reveal so much was not in his nature and yet he continued because Riki needed to understand how truly irreplaceable he was, because if the mongrel’s powers failed, they truly would die and Iason wanted no regrets.

The sound of tearing and rumbling startled him and his speech paused as pieces of debris started falling around them but not touching them because of Riki's blue shield. He risked a bit more movement and looked up, saw that the shield was expanding even further and pushing the beams and debris ever so slowly upwards, and every now and then the pressure caused pieces to break off and tumble down, to bounce off the field around them.

"You're doing it, my love. You are doing so well, nearly there, Riki." Iason started to push up, to get into a better position to protect Riki, should the shield fail, and found he couldn't. Damn. Something had definitely been damaged in his back. He could move his head and neck, had limited movement in his arms, but was unable to do anything further.

Riki was sweating and finding it hard to breathe. He dared not open his eyes because he was afraid the sight of what was above them would shatter what bit of control he had managed to gather. "More," he croaked.

Iason described in detail several of the best sex episodes they had had together, inserting words of need and desire and as many descriptions as he could. He heard Riki moan and gasp when Iason lowered his mouth to his, and thought it was working, but then Riki started to shake and the field around them started to grow dim.

What had he done wrong, Iason wondered? Had he gone overboard to the point that Riki did not believe him, or perhaps his touch was too distracting? Perhaps this power of his required a different stimulation?

"Carrie loves you so much, Riki. You want to see her again, don't you?" he insisted suddenly. "She has told me many times how much she adores you. The first time she told me I wanted to slap her in a transport and get her away from you, but then I realized the love she has for you is different than what you and I share. She thinks of you as hers. You're not, of course, you are mine, however I am willing to share you, to an extent, as I know her feelings are pure. She considers you one of her own, remember? We are part of her pride."

Iason glanced up, saw that the field was no longer growing, but nor was it shrinking and so he continued.

“And we must not forget Cal, who at this very moment is surely beside himself with worry over our fate.” Iason did not add that Cal may have died in the collapse; they would deal with that when they had to. “He is an impeccable Furniture, but that boy is completely besotted with you.”

“No!” Riki started to scowl as he recalled Bean’s accusations. “He’s not... he...”

“Don’t think I’m unaware of how he sneaks you cigarettes when you are forbidden to have them,” Iason continued, as if certain what Riki was thinking, and watched the mongrel almost smirk. “Or that I don’t know very well he leaves extra helpings of cake for you in the kitchen because he knows you will find your way there in the night, even though I warned you not to snack after midnight.” Iason’s voice gentled as he felt a pang of sadness at the idea of never being able to scold Cal again over such things. “I’ll not punish him for it though, because he has such a soft spot for you, as we all do because you are...”

“Iason!”

Iason glanced up as a filter of light suddenly beamed into the semi-darkness. “Raoul! Raoul! we are here!”

“Are you injured?” another voice called down and Iason recognized it as his brother Gideon.

“We are in a precarious position, you must hurry!”

“Iason.”

Iason turned his attention back to Riki who seemed to be shrinking beneath him. “Riki?”

“Can’t...sorry.”

“Riki, you must! Just a few more moments and...”

“I’m...sorry.”

Iason watched Riki's face go slack and knew his beloved had lost consciousness. He covered Riki with his body and prepared, once again for death, but for the second time he was surprised to find it did not find them.

"What's she doing? What in the name of Jupiter is she doing?" Gideon was demanding from above.

"Shut up and let her do it!" Raoul's voice insisted.

Iason looked up and could just make out Yielia's dark, dirty face in the small hole high above them. The field around them grew into a dark green and thickened as it rose, pushing back the majority of the debris.

The hole above grew wider and he realized his brothers were working to dig them out. Yielia's face was bright with sweat and her hands shook with her efforts.

"Hurry," he heard her gasp. "So weak, please...hurry."

Iason watched as beams, debris and clutter slowly separated and were gently placed on either side of where they lay, the field continued to protect them from the rubble above. He stared, fascinated at her power, despite himself.

Gideon and Raoul managed to peel away the layers above them to make a large gap and soon Iason could see all three of them standing beside a sleigh transport. Gideon was the first one down, jumping the long way and landing beside them as the field dissipated from around them and seemed to wrap around the remaining debris to hold it above and away.

"Iason!" He crouched and gently touched Iason's filthy cheek with a glove that was nearly shredded from his work above. "Are you injured?"

"I appear to have damaged my back," Iason stated as his brother started to lift him. "See to Riki."

"I will see to you first!" Gideon insisted, but Iason slapped his hands away.

“Riki *will* be taken out first, Gideon.” Iason watched a flicker of anger and frustration rise in his brother’s eyes.

“Fine, but I cannot get him while you are atop him.”

“Cal?”

“We found the woman and Furniture first, their rooms must have been directly over each other so they were found together.”

“Is he hurt?”

“Who?”

“Cal?”

“I do not believe so.”

“I...” Iason began to speak and watched Raoul carefully slide down into the hole on a cabled medical platform. “Ah, Raoul.”

“Can you not just live quietly?” The Blondie demanded as he hopped off the platform. The sheer terror he had experienced when he learned of the explosion and collapse had finally started to ebb. “Always such drama with you.”

Iason managed a smile. “Then you would be bored, brother.”

“Hmmm.” Raoul pulled at two beams that had been crossing Iason’s back and propped them up against the remaining debris above, then removed a circular object from his slacks pocket and slapped it against them. Instantly, a golden force-field sprung outwards to contain the rubble.

“Okay my dear!” he called up and watched with a moment of concern as the dark-skinned woman slumped forward in relief, to be caught by one of the workers. He turned and crouched beside Gideon. “Are you injured, Iason?”

“He thinks his back is damaged,” Gideon replied and was startled and pleased with Iason suddenly reached out to take his hand. “What is it? Are you in pain?”

“Yes, although I believe that is a side effect. Promise me you will take Riki first, Gideon.”

“Iason, we must get you both out, now do as...”

“Riki...Riki first...promise me!” Iason demanded and felt his system shutting down. “Oh hell.”

Gideon glanced over at Raoul with concern. “We need to get him to a med centre. Take him up, Raoul, I will see to the pet.”

“No, you take Iason up,” Raoul said as he leaned closer to examine the shallow colour on Riki’s face. “A Blondie can be moved without causing further injury, a mongrel cannot. I have to check his injuries before we move him.”

“I can check him...”

“Gideon, you’re wasting time.”

“Damn it, Raoul. He made me promise to deal with the boy first!”

“We are dealing with him. Just tell him it was my decision, now get Iason out of here.”

“I expect you to take full responsibility and protect me from his ire, Raoul.” Gideon scowled, then carefully picked up his brother, gently placed the unconscious Blondie on the platform and placed his feet on either side of Iason’s hips. “Bring it up!” he called and started to rise out of the hole.

“Riki?” Raoul tapped Riki’s cheeks, the smudges of dirt upon them were streaked with tear tracks and he felt a stab of sympathy and surprise. He couldn’t remember if he had ever seen the pet cry before. He slapped a little harder. “Riki, wake up.”

Riki managed to open his eyes and blink up at Raoul. “Fucking nightmares,” he muttered and started to close his eyes again.

As that was the second time someone had said that to him, Raoul wondered if he would start to get a complex? He slapped Riki with a little more strength, not just to rouse him but because of the remark.

“Ow!”

“Wake up, damn you, and tell me if you’re injured.”

Riki’s dazed eyes started to focus on his surroundings and the memory of what had happened came flooding back. “Of course, I’m fucking injured!” he snapped, both his fear and the embarrassment from had occurred between he and Iason causing him to bite the hand that fed him. “A fucking building fell on me!”

“Not hard enough to knock any sense into you, obviously.” Raoul peeled off his ruined gloves, and though he was loathe to do it, started to press around Riki’s naked back and chest. “Any pain?”

Riki glared at him. “Didn’t I just tell you? I hurt every...” Riki’s eyes glassed over suddenly and his head whipped around. “Iason. Where’s Iason?”

“He’s being taken to a med centre.” Raoul decided Riki didn’t have a neck or spinal injury given the way the young man was tossing his head back and forth. “Move your toes for me.”

“My toes?” Riki managed to lift his head and realized he was completely naked. Of course, he had been in bed at the time of the crash. “Fuck!” He started to slap his hands over his groin, and winced when the action caused him pain. “Oh, shit!”

“Where does it hurt, specifically,” Raoul demanded leaned forward to examine Riki’s shoulder.

“Go away! I’m naked here!”

“I’ve seen you naked before, Riki, so don’t bother being shy now.”

“Where’s Iason?”

Raoul scowled and his eyes narrowed on Riki’s sudden slack expression. “For the love of Jupiter! You’re going into shock.” Raoul would have to take the chance that Riki had not badly injured his spine. He pulled off his coat and carefully wrapped it around the mongrel as the platform descended again. He picked him up, hopped on and rode to the top with Riki in his arms.

“Maku!” Yielia sobbed as they moved him to the air sleigh and threw herself across Riki’s chest. Her clothes had also been torn and ripped, her body covered in bruises and scrapes.

Cal was in similar shape, his arm already being held straight in a stasis field, knelt between his master and his friend; the dog who had led to their rescue by barking madly, and then led the team to where Iason and Riki were, curled up in the boy’s lap and started to doze.

At the med-centre, Iason was taken into emergency while Riki was placed on a gurney in a separate room with Cal and Yielia standing by. Someone had given Yielia a blanket to cover herself with, but she had immediately placed it over Riki, so Cal gave her what was left of his pajama shirt; it covered her better than what she had been wearing anyway but left him bare-chested.

Kanin entered the room a short while later and scowled at the two figures huddled close to the pet.

“Master Iason?” Cal began and stepped forward.

“Why haven’t you been treated?” The physician demanded and moved to the doorway to demand assistance. Two men who had been leaning against a desk chatting, entered. “Do you two work here?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Are you medically trained?”

“Of course, sir. We’re trained up to level six.”

“Then explain to me why there are two people in here dripping blood all over my clean floor!”

“Sir, they’re just mongrels.”

“That one is the ward of Iason Mink!” Kanin stated pointing at Cal. “The one on the table is the consort of Iason Mink!” He watched as the two men started to lose color. “And that one...” He paused at Yielia. “I have no idea who the hell she is but she should have already been treated. Now do, it or I’ll show you how a medical officer trained at level twenty performs surgery without anesthesia!”

The two men moved forward and started to hustle Yielia and Cal out of the room, but both refused to leave Riki.

“Go with them, I’ll take care of the trouble maker.” Kanin assured.

Yielia shook her head, even as she swayed on her feet. She had expanded too much energy during their task to rescue her Prince, and now she did not have enough power to heal him, or even herself. “I will not leave, Maku.”

“Cal.”

Cal nodded and put his arm around Yielia’s waist. “The doctor will take care of Riki,” he assured. “You do not want him to see you like this when he wakes, do you?”

Yielia shook her head again and leaned on him. “I must be with him.”

“You will be, but we must be treated first, so we can be at our best to take care of him.” Cal led Yielia out and the two med officers followed reluctantly.

Riki woke up just as Kanin leaned over him. “Gah!”

“Missed me that much did you?” Kanin smiled and straightened. “Where does it hurt? Or rather, where doesn’t it hurt, pick a spot.”

Riki groggily lifted his left arm. “Here’s okay.”

“Good.”

“Ow! What the fu...” He glared at Kanin and rubbed his arm where the doctor had shoved a needle into it. “What was that?”

“Something for the pain.”

“Why didn’t you give me a pill?”

“I prefer sharp objects when I’m medicating, gets right to the point.” Kanin pulled the blanket off Riki, then had to struggle to get Riki to release Raoul’s coat. “Oh for Jupiter’s sake, boy! I promise to give it back.”

Riki lost the struggle because he was far weaker than he anticipated, but Kanin set the coat aside then removed a clean, sterile sheet from a wall cabinet and gently draped it across Riki’s waist.

“So modest for a pet.”

“I’m not a pet.”

“Ah, yes.” Kanin wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “You’re a wife now right.”

If Riki had the energy he would have taken a swing at the arrogant Sapphire so instead he turned his head away and tried to sit up.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kanin simply put one hand on the mongrel’s forehead and held him in place on the gurney. “I haven’t examined you yet.” He shined a light in Riki’s eyes, then gently probed around Riki’s skull with his fingers. “Hmmm.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Shut up, I’m working here.” Kanin placed his penlight between his teeth and then used his free hand to probe around Riki’s neck. “Any sensitivity? Pain?”

“Yes, a serious pain. In my ass, and he’s standing over me holding me to a fucking table!”

“I just bet you’ve had bigger pain in your ass, kid.” Kanin leaned down and whispered. “I’ve seen Iason naked. Ouch.”

“Where is Iason?”

“You should worry about yourself before you start worrying about him.”

“Can you let go?”

“Can you stay down?”

“Yes.”

“Oh good, we’ve reached an accord.” Kanin removed his hand and continued his examination.

His physician’s gaze took in the multiple cuts, bruises and contusions on the mongrel’s bare skin. When he turned Riki on his side; the bruising across his back was horrific and the fact that the mongrel didn’t even try to protest concerned him.

He tsked. “Bet that hurts.” He lifted the blanket and poked lightly at Riki’s penis.

“Fuck off!”

Riki slapped him away and Kanin nodded, pleased. “Reflexes normal. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three.”

Kanin glanced at his open palm. “Close enough.”

“How many am I holding up?” Riki sneered as he lifted his middle finger and was shocked when the Elite caught Riki’s hand and pulled the finger into his mouth. “What the hell?”

“Ssshh,” Kanin said as released Riki’s finger almost instantly and the sensors in his tongue analyzed the skin for any toxins from the dust of the collapse. Finding none, he nodded. “Good. Open wide.”

Riki didn’t have a choice as he found his jaw yanked open and something small and round dropped inside.

“Suck on that for ten minutes,” Kanin ordered, pushing Riki’s mouth closed, then placing his hand over it when the mongrel tried to spit out the foul thing. “It is absorbing the dirt and dust in your mouth and sinus, so you don’t get an infection. Be a good boy and keep it in and I’ll give you a real candy later.”

Riki grimaced and glared but he continued to suck on the lozenge. It was like sucking smelly wet feet after they’d walked through garbage.

“Where’s Iason?”

“He’s in surgery.”

Surgery! Riki tried to sit up again and once more Kanin’s hand pushed him back.

“I thought we had an agreement?”

“What’s wrong with him? Why are they doing surgery? How badly is he hurt?”

Kanin regarded Riki amused. “Awww, that’s so sweet. It’s good for a wife to love their spouse.”

“I’m not a wife!”

“Well, Iason’s the dominate one so, honey, you sure as hell are not the husband.”

“You don’t know shit! You...” Riki reignited his temper. “Why aren’t you operating on him? Why are you down here with me when you should be...”

“I’m a pet doctor, not a Blondie doctor. He is in good hands, don’t you worry. In fact, I expect he will be up and around before you are.”

Riki allowed the relief to fill his chest and his body started to relax a little.

“So who did you piss off this time?” Kanin asked as he ran a hand scanner over Riki’s body, searching for breaks and fractures,

“Who knows,” Riki sighed and closed his eyes. God, his head hurt so much. “When’s that pain stuff supposed to kick in?”

Kanin scowled. “You’re still feeling pain?”

“My head is killing me.”

“Hmmm.” Kanin asked Riki a selection of questions such as the date, where he lived, what he had for dinner and breakfast. Riki answered slowly as if he had to really think about it.

“Where’s Iason? Is he okay?”

Kanin made note that Riki had asked the question three times now, short term memory loss all right. Confusion and disorientation. “He’ll be fine.”

“Doc?”

Kanin leaned over him. “Yes, Riki?”

“I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Kanin quickly grabbed an empty basin as Riki leaned over on his side and began to vomit. “Oh, now, that wasn’t ten minutes,” he teased as the lozenge was the first thing to hit the bowl. “No candy for you.”

He gently rubbed Riki's back as the young man emptied whatever was in his stomach, then helped him lay back on the gurney. Instead of tossing the bile, he took a sample of it and slid it into an analyzer station by the wall; pleased to see no foreign substances, toxins or blood in the mixture.

Kanin returned to Riki and pulled the sheet all the way up to cover the mongrel's chest, then added the additional blanket for warmth so Riki was covered from his feet to just below his neck. Riki's answers were less than convincing and his eyes were having trouble focusing. The vomiting, while reasonably clear, was another sign of his concussion.

He slid his hand into his pocket and came out with a clear wrapped candy, offered it and Riki weakly accepted.

"Thanks." Riki was having trouble unwrapping it so Kanin did it for him and waited for him to put it in his mouth. It had a sweet, almost citrus flavor that eased his throat and helped remove the taste of the other lozenge.

"Better?" Kanin asked, kindly and patted Riki's shoulder.

"Yeah."

"I'll have them prepare a room for you, so just stay there and don't move until someone comes and gets you, clear?"

"I don't need a room, just send me home."

"Riki, you don't have a home," Kanin returned. "It went boom and you fell down, remember?"

Riki blinked. "What?"

"Don't worry, it will come back to you."

"Where are Cal and Yielia?"

"They're here and also being treated. You can see them once we get you in your room."

“Doc?”

Kanin turned back as he reached the doorway.

“Is Iason really okay?”

“Trust me.” He smiled. “I’m a doctor.” He stepped out, closed the door and his expression hardened. He snapped his fingers and a staff member rushed over. “Prepare a private room for the man inside and put a guard on the door. No one but myself and Lord Mink is permitted to enter without my consent.”

“Yes, sir.” The woman hurried off as Kanin turned back towards the elevator. From the news reports an unmanned vehicle drove through Iason Mink’s condo. It was being hailed an accident, a short in the vehicle’s system, but Kanin didn’t buy that for one second. It seemed his favorite pet and Blondie were in trouble once again.

“Kanin!”

The lift doors opened and he found Gideon and Raoul inside. He stepped in. “Gentlemen.”

“How is Riki?” Raoul inquired as Kanin pressed the upper floor.

“He has a mild concussion and multiple cuts and bruises but he’ll be fine. Probably.”

“Probably?” Gideon smirked.

“I’m a doctor, not a psychic. I could heal him today and he’ll go find more trouble tomorrow. Who’s to say?”

“Iason is out of surgery,” Gideon replied. “He’ll want a full report on the pet. Which room is he in?”

“He isn’t yet, I’m arranging that now.” The doors opened and all three Elites stepped out. “Not to worry, I’ll update Iason as soon as he is awake.”

“One of us should stay with the boy, Iason made me promise...”

“I appreciate that, Gideon, however Riki is my patient and I can assure you that he will be protected while under my care.”

“We appreciate that, Kanin,” Raoul said and followed the doctor down the hall. “However, given the circumstances, it would be best if we saw Riki’s condition for ourselves. Iason will not trust...”

“Iason will trust exactly what I tell him, but beyond that I am Riki’s doctor of record and I will not divulge any further information about my patient to you or anyone other than his master...” Kanin smiled slowly. “I mean his spouse of record. Now, if you will please excuse me, I have many more people to see.”

“His bedside manner is horrible,” Gideon smirked as Raoul walked back to him.

“Yes, but he’s also the best pet doctor on or off planet.”

“Can we trust him, then?”

“What choice do we have?” Raoul scowled. “Call a meeting Gideon. If this was an accident I’m a Doverian Donkey.”

“Well, your laugh sounds rather whiny.”

Raoul glared at him.

“Really, Raoul, you simply must learn to let some things go and enjoy life more.”

“Iason almost died, Gideon!”

Gideon sobered. “I am aware and I was just as appalled as you when we saw that pile of rubble where they were trapped. Do you think I am so cold hearted not to be? Iason is my brother!”

“No.” Raoul sighed, shook his head and set his hand on Gideon’s shoulder. His brother was far too easy going and often was amused by the torment of others, but he had seen the horror and fear on the Blondie’s face when they reached the crash scene, had watched his brother rip through the debris like a man possessed. “Something is going on here and we need to get to the bottom of it.”

“I agree. I will call a meeting.” Gideon reached up and patted Raoul’s hand. “We will discover how this happened and the party responsible will pay dearly.”

Bean entered the apartment and headed for the kitchen to begin preparations for dinner. His master rarely ate breakfast here, and only sometimes lunch, but was always here for dinner.

Suddenly a hand gripped him and threw him to the floor. He looked up at the Shadow and cringed. “M...Master. What is it? What’s wrong?”

“What have you done?”

“I...I was just going to prepare dinner. I wanted to get some fresh spices and...” The gloved hand hit him so hard across the face that Bean was worried his jaw might have been broken.

“It was supposed to frighten them!” the Shadow growled, furious, his red eyes the only thing apparent beneath his dark sheathe. “It was supposed to disrupt the shield only, not drive through and collapse several floors.”

Bean checked to confirm he could still move his jaw, and slowly moved to his knees, his head lowered. “I apologize, sir. I did as you asked and requested the vehicle be programed for that initiative...”

“If it was programed for it why didn’t it stop?”

“I...I’m unsure. Perhaps the technician programed it wrong or...or perhaps it was a malfunction...” Bean gasped as he was lifted off the floor by his throat and slammed against the wall.

“Iason Mink almost died. Do you know what would have happened to you if he had?”

Tears formed in Bean’s eyes as he struggled to breathe. “I...I’m sorry. I did what you asked. I...” The fingers around his throat tightened. “It’s him! It must be him! The one who has been sabotaging us recently! The one who has been asking questions!”

“It makes no sense for him to do this! He is a miner annoyance that will be dealt with, but he would not have done this. He would not have caused such harm to them.”

“I...I did my best. Please, sir! Please. I did what you asked!”

The Shadow growled and released Bean, letting the boy drop to the floor and gulp in precious air. If he did not need the Furniture he would have killed him already. Bean had done his bidding up until now, so it didn’t make sense for him to sabotage their plan so badly either. Still, who else was there to blame?

“Go and prepare dinner, then call in Sarconi and arrange a meet at the Sprinkling Diamond.”

“Y...yes sir.” Bean got shakily to his feet as his Master stalked towards his private room. “S...sir?”

“What is it?”

“What...what of the pet, sir?”

“Injured but not fatally. Admittedly it would have been easier if the boy had died, but he did not and that was not the intention of my plan. Do not make any further mistakes, Bean, or you will find yourself back on that mining colony quicker than you can blink.”

“Y...yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Bean waited until The Shadow entered his room then he turned and headed for his room on the far other side of the apartment. He opened the door, carefully closed it then slid down and let his tears of frustration and trembling rage release.

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! How many lives did The Pet have? How could he have survived such a thing? What would it take to get rid of Riki the Dark once and for all? The Shadow was mad, that was obvious, his obsession with Iason Mink was unnatural and dangerous. Iason almost died, so the hell what? Isn’t that what they had wanted, from the beginning? He wanted Riki dead and the Master wanted Iason dead, but now the Shadow’s plan had changed. Now he just wanted to hurt Iason or cause trouble for him.

Bean slowly rose and went into the washroom to wash his tear-stained face. He stared at the finger imprints around his throat and became so angry, so in despair that his plan of reprogramming the vehicle trajectory and instructions had not worked! What did he have to do to get rid of them so he could move on with his life?

With The Pet and Iason Mink out of the way he could return to Tanagura as Furniture. He would explain that Iason had sent him on a secret mission and he would portray true grief and sadness at the loss of his former master, but he was still the Furniture on record; he’d checked and Iason had not hired another, so he would be in charge of the Mink finances and household.

He would have to deal with Raoul and Katze of course, who was the only other ones who knew what he had done, but that wouldn’t be a problem once he got rid of Iason. Then he would be sitting pretty with Iason’s funds and home until he found a better, more prominent and successful Master.

But Iason and Riki would not die! Why won’t they just die! There had to be another way to do it, a quicker more efficient way. Maybe he should just go there himself, do what had to be done? Yes. Yes, his Master didn’t have the stomach to complete what they had started, so it was obvious that Bean was going to have to take the reins.

He washed his face and stared at his reflection, pleased with his decision. Running a quick comb through his hair, he changed into a sleeveless turtleneck to hide the bruises on his neck, then went to prepare dinner.

Chapter 24

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason is out of surgery and Riki waits for him

Iason entered Jupiter's tower and requested an audience. Unlike the last several weeks, he was granted access almost immediately and stepped into her inner sanctum. She bore her traditional, futuristic hologram to greet him, and spoke in her usual telepathic manner.

Iason. Are you well? Were you injured in the collapse of your dwelling?

"I am undamaged, Jupiter. I have come to discuss the matter with you."

The records have been reviewed. No fault is found among them. No order was given of access for this vehicle to enter EOS airspace.

"Someone must have or it would not have gotten inside."

Unlikely. Only a Blondie may overwrite the security edicts.

Iason nodded, he knew that much. "And yet only a Blondie has such authority."

You believe one of your brothers is responsible?

"I see no other possible scenario, Jupiter. If a Blondie allowed this vehicle to enter our restricted airspace, they must be held accountable."

Do you believe any Blondie would harbor such feelings against their own, Iason? Do you believe this act was deliberate to cause you injury?

"That I do not know. It is entirely possible that the vehicle was allowed in for another reason and simply malfunctioned. Possible, but unlikely."

The odds are 87.42. What is it you wish?

“I must confront the others with this information. I am uncertain how they will react. Their behavior of late has been...erratic.”

There was a long pause as Jupiter’s hologram dimmed, and shuttered, a sign She was processing the information or checking other systems for further details before making Her decision.

How is Riki?

Iason blinked at the sudden question. “He is well. Somewhat injured in the collapse but not severely.”

When he has recovered you will bring here.

Iason nodded. “Of course, Jupiter.” He kept his thoughts deliberately blank as he waited for her digest his response.

Finally, the hologram was stable again and She spoke. *You have authority to do what you must. You are head of the Syndicate. You wear our colours and are our favored son. What more do you require?*

“I fear it will not be enough.” Iason returned quietly and touched his jeweled braid. “I ask for your seal, Jupiter. For this one matter, the use of your seal to deal with this situation quickly and efficiently and to stamp out any future instances.”

Agreed. For this matter only, Iason.

“Yes, Jupiter. Of course.” He glanced to the side as a panel in the wall opened and a small glowing globe floated out and paused next to him. He opened his hand and it settled upon it. “Thank you, Jupiter.”

Temporary accommodations have been prepared for you on the East side of our tower. Send your Furniture there to stock it with what you will require. Her hologram moved towards him and two long, cybernetic hands touched either side of his face. *No one shall hurt you here.*

He nodded, and knelt in deference to her generous offer. “You are too kind, Jupiter.”

Send the boy along soon.

“I will.” He rose, bowed and then turned and stalked out.

He nodded briefly to the guards and pocketed Jupiter’s seal. He kept his mind blank until he was well away from the tower and in his own vehicle, where he allowed his rage to run free. She was hiding something from him, he could sense it! Damn it! He hit the steering wheel.

When the surgeon who had repaired the module in his back asked to see him privately, once he’d awoken from recovery, Iason had thought it would simply be to advise him of the details of the new module and its upkeep. Instead, the surgeon had expressed concerns about changes in Iason’s body that should not be there.

It was little things, the surgeon said, little pieces that he didn’t recognize and seemed more organic in origin than cybernetic. As they did not appear to be interfering with his systems, the surgeon had not removed them, but he asked if Iason had undergone any other surgeries recently and if so for what purpose. He was very curious about the organic materials.

Iason had no explanation for him, as he had not been through any sort of surgery. It was not until he was on his way to see Riki that he remembered the unknown crystals in his eyes and the fact that he could not recall when they had been placed there.

He returned to the surgeon and requested the photos and reports of the organic anomalies found inside him, then asked if the doctor had checked everywhere else. The surgeon admitted that as they had only worked on Iason’s back, he had not explored farther. Iason requested a full seeded examination, which meant the doctor would use a microscopic laser exploratory-scope to review every area of Iason’s body.

It was an invasive, sometimes painful procedure, even for a Blondie, and was usually only done on Elites who had suddenly shut down for no reason. In the history of their kind, the procedure had only been conducted three times, and only once on a functional Elite. It had never been performed on a Blondie, so this would be a historic moment for the surgeon.

Iason paid to have the procedure done off the books, insisted on being awake for it and allowing only one assistant for the doctor, which was unheard of. However, when Iason Mink wanted something, one did not argue. Iason returned to surgery and was on the table for nearly eight hours, then another three to recover, because while pain was a relative thing for an Elite, the procedure had been difficult and, on some level, traumatic as well. Although Elites were well aware of their cybernetic bodies and organic minds, seeing them up close, without the human-like flesh covering them was slightly horrific to his organic mind. He knew he was not a Human, but rarely did he think of himself as a machine either.

Once he had recovered he contacted Kanin to check on Riki's condition, then contacted Katze and asked him to go to the crash site and find out whatever he could. He knew his man was still in therapy for his foot and using crutches, but there was no one else he could trust. A quick trip to his office and a discrete check into the security records yielded him some valuable information, then he headed for Jupiter's tower.

He had expected more from Jupiter, had intended to advise Her about the additions to his body as well as how to deal with this current issue, but the moment he had stepped inside Her chamber he had sensed a kind of barrier between them. When She showed little interest in the way the Blondies were behaving, he knew that something was very wrong.

Jupiter usually abstained from interfering in their lives, but when it came to the general order of things and Her rules, She would intervene instances where She felt her creations were upsetting her sense of order. Yet, despite the obvious recent issues with the Blondies and a general sense of growing chaos, She was willing to leave everything up to Iason.

This was of great concern to him. Not because he would not rise to the challenge, but because She seemed to have removed Herself from the situation entirely. It felt difficult to broach the subject of his extra parts in that moment. When he tried, something akin to shame had suppressed his will and as a Blondie he had never felt such an emotion. In that moment, Jupiter should have been able to sense his distress, yet She said nothing. Yes, something was very, very off.

Katze called him and advised of his findings, then mentioned that Raoul had called a meeting of the other Blondies. Iason did not ask how Katze knew such things, he simply had a way, and he asked Katze to continue looking into a few more things for him as he headed to the main hive of buildings where most of the higher echelon of Elites worked.

Riki lay in the hospital bed in his private room as Yielia fussed with his blankets and pillows. She and Cal had entered less than an hour before with a change of clothes for Riki, which was pajamas, ones the mongrel was currently wearing, a couple of pairs of jeans, shirts and socks. Cal had changed into pair of tailored slacks and sleeveless tunic and had also purchased a simple but demure frock for Yielia to wear, as well as shoes for their feet.

It had been almost a full day since Riki had been put in the private suite and there was still no sign of Iason. Kanin had insisted the Blondie was out of surgery and had been discharged, but why then, Riki wondered, hadn't Iason come to see him?

He still didn't have much memory of what happened, but Cal had filled him in on what little he knew, enough that Riki realized the condo had been destroyed, Riki was more upset that someone had tried to hurt Iason than the fact they had lost their home, as he had never fully felt comfortable there anyway.

Cal's arm had been fractured and he was wearing a stasis cast until it healed, so the kid was running around doing everything one handed. Of course, because it was Cal, he was still more capable than any two-handed person.

Where the hell was Iason? Kanin refused to release him and Riki was getting pissed off at being kept in the hospital against his will, Sure, he had

a few bumps and bruises, but he could still walk and his head didn't hurt that much anymore.

When he felt his arm being lifted his gaze shifted from the closed door of his room where he had been staring, waiting for it to open and Iason to enter, to Yielia who was placing her hand over the cuts and wounds on his flesh.

“Stop it!” He yanked his arm away, knowing she was, for the third time, discretely trying to heal him.

He'd heard from Kanin that she had been quite badly injured when the condo collapsed, as she had fallen down through two floors, Iason and he had apparently fallen through four. Her skin was paler than usual and she had bruising on her left eye and a bandage across her forehead. Kanin had also advised that she'd fractured several ribs but that they seemed to be knitting rather quickly on their own.

“Maku, you are hurt and I...”

“If you want to heal someone heal yourself, or heal Cal! These are just scratches, they'll heal on their own,”

Yielia, who had taken a rather submissive and hesitant posture with him since he'd ordered her home, and then changed his mind to let her stay, flashed dark eyes at him and grabbed his arm again.

“I am your Ebarde. It is my job to care for you, now be quiet and allow me to do as I must!”

Riki's eyes widened at her tone, then narrowed. “I'm in a fucking hospital. I'll be fine.” He yanked at his arm again, startled when he couldn't pull from her grip this time. “Let go.”

“No.” She passed her hand quickly over his arm and the abrasions and bruises showed briefly on her own bare skin, before slowly dissipating, leaving both arms free of injury. “You have irresponsibly removed twenty

cycles from my life span by being buried beneath that house! You will do as I tell you now.”

Riki and Cal gaped at her.

“I didn’t drive the damn car through our window!” Riki protested as she grabbed his other arm and did the same thing.

“If you had allowed me to train you properly...”

“I told you not to bring that up! I’m not ready for fuck sake! Why can’t you understand...”

“You could have died!” she snapped, and her eyes teared-up. “If Lord Iason had not been there...” She owed the Elite a debt that could never be repaid. When he’d entered her room just as the horrific vision had assailed her, she had been frightened and confused, but he seemed to understand there was a problem and he had rushed to Riki’s side. And thank the Gods, thank all the Gods he had, for Riki surely would not have survived otherwise.

When that tiny sliver of debris had been cleared away and she saw her beloved Prince and the formidable Blondie below her heart had almost stopped. Iason had been covering Riki’s body with his own, had protected Riki against being crushed beneath the rubble.

She blinked her tears away, slid his sheet down and lifted up his shirt. “Now you will sit there and let me do this!”

Riki was too shocked by her show of emotion to do anything else, so he let her heal the injuries on his chest, but when she started to lean him forward to deal with the awful bruising on his back, he felt her sway.

“Okay, enough.” He caught her arms. “Yielia, you’re hurt too.”

“I will be fine, I just...”

“I’ll be fine too. They’re just bruises, okay. Come on, just...just sit down and stop fussing. Please? You’re driving me crazy with it.”

The small smile he offered her when he said it took the sting from his words and she wordlessly slid into a plush, chair in the small sitting area of the room. “I am responsible for you, Riki.”

“I’m responsible for myself.” Riki growled and lay back on the bed. “When are you people finally gonna get that? And where the fuck is Iason?”

“A Blondie almost died,” Raoul stated, to the other Blondies seated around the long table. Hours! It had taken hours to gather them all together as several were out of town and Diman, of course, was off planet. “A vehicle managed to bypass Eos security and fly through a residential building. How could such a thing have happened?”

“Why the tone of surprise?” Po Laren returned. “We have been subject to his whims for several years now and have come to see why Iason has made so many enemies.”

“Do you consider yourself one as well, then?” Gideon countered.

“I have no desire to consider myself a friend or an enemy. Iason has been out of control for far too long. Jupiter has foolishly accepted his ridiculous demands while the rest of us suffer through the ensuing chaos caused by his actions.”

“How do his actions affect you?” Another Blondie asked, intrigued by the comment. “They are not in keeping with tradition, certainly, but they are his personal decisions. We have all made similar choices in our personal affairs and they are private...”

“Nothing Iason Mink does is private!” Aisha snapped. “Everything he has done, taking a mongrel pet, letting it work, letting it roam and then making

it a mate, He has made a mockery of us by flaunting that worthless piece of flesh in our faces every chance he gets!"

"As I recall," Gideon added, calmly. "It was you who continued to harass Iason about the pet, causing Orphe to complain to Jupiter, which in turn made Iason's private life public forum."

"Jupiter had the right to know when rules were being broken! Iason was sleeping with the damn thing! That is completely forbidden!"

"Technically it isn't. Jupiter frowned on physical relationships with pets, but there is no actual law forbidding it." Raoul smirked at Gideon. "I checked."

Gideon chuckled as Raoul continued.

"Iason has taken too many liberties for far too long." Diman stated. "Taking a filthy mongrel as his pet was really the last straw."

"And yet you wanted to breed your pet to that filthy mongrel so badly you allowed her to attempt to seduce Riki without permission?" Raoul retorted and Diman glowered at him.

"That is what I am talking about! That was a simple misunderstanding and yet Iason has essentially ruined me! He believes he is the most powerful Blondie in Tanagura!"

"Oh now, that's simple nonsense." Gideon leaned back in his chair and examined his nails. "Iason is the most powerful Blondie, ever." His eyes sparked red for an instant as he looked at Diman, before returning to normal. "Iason is, because he has made himself so, because it is through his efforts, and not from anything any of us have done, that Blondies have developed the reputation we have in this and several other sectors. Do any of you deny this?"

When everyone remained silent, Leon Clare, a Blondie that dealt with the mining communities on Amoï spoke up.

“His pet is the issue. People have begun to believe that the mongrel is as powerful as Iason, or on the same level as a Blondie. It has been made worse since Jupiter’s ruling.”

“And as Gideon has pointed out,” Raoul said. “If all of you had not allowed your ridiculous envy to make you sound like squabbling children, Jupiter would have never become involved. Iason would have been able to retain his privacy and Riki would have remained just a pet.”

“It was not only us. Everyone knew he was keeping a mongrel pet,” Po insisted. “And that he refused to take to any of the pet parties. What were we to think?”

“That Iason wanted to keep his pet to himself, which is his right as a master,” Raoul retorted. “And if you had dismissed your petty jealousies and left it at that, no one else would have said a word about it. You and several of our brothers were the ones spreading the gossip about Riki and your displeasure at what Iason was doing with his pet. That, to me, is far more distasteful than anything Iason has done.”

“Face it, Po,” Gideon chuckled. “You were angry because you only got to see Riki in action once and you got a taste for it.”

How dare you!”

When Po’s eyes flashed red and he bolted out of his chair Gideon ignored him while

“It is the truth, why can we not be honest with each other?” Griffith Wallace, a Blondie who rarely spoke at such meetings but had worked often with Iason on Syndicate business, said. “We envied Iason his mongrel. Envied him the physical relationship they had and so we tried to take it away from him. Regardless of our past behavior Iason is still one of us, and the leader of the Syndicate. Such a vicious attack cannot go unpunished!”

“What do you think we can do about it?” Marcus Jayd asked in a bored voice. “There is nothing left of the vehicle to trace, no recordings, no VIN

numbers and no database remaining to investigate who programmed the thing.”

“Agreed,” Aisha shrugged. “With no evidence there is nowhere to start. As Po stated earlier, Iason has many enemies. There is no way to ascertain who the culprit is with no beginning.”

“Oh, but there is.”

Every Blondie’s head turned as the subject of their conversation entered the room. Iason had changed into a red and black slack suit and matching cape that was accented with white gloves and white boots.

“Iason!”

Iason and Gideon rose together.

“You should be resting!” Raoul insisted.

“It seems I have rested too long as it is.” Iason stalked around the table to his usual chair, his cape managing to convey power and a sense of danger as it swirled around his firm, formidable body. He did not sit, instead he remained standing and stared down at all of them. “I appreciate your willingness to investigate this matter on my behalf.”

Raoul and Gideon exchanged a startled glance, Iason very rarely used sarcasm, and the way he spoke now left a decidedly oppressive ambience to the room.

“However, I can handle such matters on my own.”

He pulled a small, round, cylindrical sphere from his pocket and placed it on the table. It pulsed with the glow of starlight and a trimming of amethyst and gold. A general murmur came from his brothers as they stared at the sphere, but Iason ignored them.

“I have received the seal of Jupiter to attend to this issue in whatever manner I see fit. The vehicle which breached Eos security and crashed into

my condo at approximately 0400 this morning was deemed irretrievable. It exploded on impact and was essentially vaporized by the falling debris.”

“As I was just saying,” Marcus nodded. “As there is no way to gather evidence...”

“There is always a way to gather evidence,” Iason interrupted coldly. “If one knows where to look. For instance, I looked into our main security system, which is the most secure and intricate of its kind. It is impossible to breach without a command code or a complete shut-down of the system.”

“There, you see? How can we find...”

“Unless,” Iason continued. “You pry into its failsafe function, where there is a default instruction that the shield code can be overridden for exactly two minutes before midnight, every cycle. This function was added for maintenance purposes and most of the current technicians are not even aware of it.

“So, what are you saying, Iason?” Gideon asked intrigued. “Were you able to find who instructed the shield to drop?”

“No, the default function requires a voice and pupil authorization, no code was used.”

Raoul sighed. “So we’re back to square one?”

“Not at all.” Iason paused and met each of their gazes with the cold, ruthless ice of his own. “The only one who is cleared for such authorization is a Blondie.”

Iason let his accusation sink in and was prepared for the immediate push back from his brothers.

“That’s impossible!”

“What exactly are you saying, Iason?”

“Are you suggesting one of us...?”

“What possible reason...”

“How could you think....”

He spoke again, immediately drowning out their protests. “As I do not expect any of you to be honest enough to admit to your wrong doing, your assets have been frozen.” He leaned his hands on the table, pressed forward. “All of them, even the hidden ones.”

There was a shock of silence, and then every Blondie picked up their PPC and started checking their accounts. Angry murmurs began as each one received a no access warning, and grew into shouting.

“This is outrageous!”

“You can’t do that! Only Jupiter has such authority!”

“I have done nothing! How dare you do this!”

“You have gone too far this time, Iason!”

“I will not stand for such infidelity!”

Iason slammed his hands on the table, loud enough to silence them, and caused a few to jump, startled. “Someone tried to kill me today. They almost succeeded in killing my mate, as well as the members of my household.” He straightened and walked to Aisha who had been the last to shout a complaint. He grabbed the Blondie up by the shirt front, out of his seat. “You won’t stand? Infidelity? What do any of you even know about that word? You have no concept of what it is to be a brother, what it is to be family.”

Aisha’s eyes widened as Iason’s eyes glowed blood red.

“I do know and one of you almost caused me to lose that family. I will *not* forgive such a betrayal.” He shoved his brother away and the Blondie slumped in his seat, “You charge me with irrational behavior?” He reached into the pocket of his cape and threw a handful of papers at them, littering the long table. “Complaints, against all you. Complaints of irregular and

disturbing behavior. Of assault and accusation. Fourteen suits for damages and you dare lecture me? You are all out of control!"

Raoul had picked up some of the reports and was scowling, while his brothers murmured angrily among themselves. His eyes widened at some of the offences, how were these possible? A Blondie would never do such things.

He opened his mouth to ask but Iason was speaking again.

"You have twenty-four hours to reveal the guilty party. If they do not come forward by noon tomorrow, your assets will be permanently removed and your titles revoked." Iason turned and with a swirl of his cape brushed out of the room, ignoring the chaos that erupted behind him.

"Iason, how could you do this?" Raoul demanded as he and Gideon hurried after him. "Do you not trust us?"

"It is not a matter of trust. My decision was applied to everyone without prejudice." Iason paused, like he wanted to say something more, but instead he closed his mouth with a snap.

"We understand," Gideon decided, tossed an arm around Iason's shoulders and held out a gloved hand. "Lend me some credits so I can buy lunch will you?"

"And dinner," Raoul added as his arm slid around Iason's waist so Iason was in the middle of the two Blondies.

Iason felt the first tingle of relief in hours, at the show of support, and felt his lips twitch. "I regret that I cannot show any favoritism in this."

"And you call yourself our brother." Gideon squeezed Iason's shoulder, then moved his hand down and brushed Iason's ass, smiled. "I could make it worth your while?"

Iason turned his head toward Gideon, smirked. "Are you fond of that hand, brother?"

“Very fond.” Gideon laughed, gave Iason’s ass a pat and pulled away. “I know a few places where we can get a free lunch, Raoul, and then both of you come for dinner at my place. Bring your pet, Iason, and the others and stay until you find new accommodations.”

“I appreciate the offer, Gideon, but I already have a new place arranged for us.”

Raoul’s eyebrows rose. “So quickly?”

“I must move quickly, indeed even faster than that. Please, if you’ll excuse me?” Iason gave them both a look of gratitude then stalked away.

“You better not have purchased that new place with my frozen money, you bastard!” Gideon called after him and chuckled when Iason waved before disappearing into a lift. “Well.” He slid an arm around Raoul’s waist. “How does it feel to be a pauper?”

Raoul smirked. “Why don’t you tell me?” He pulled a credit stick out of his pocket. “While we’re dining at Chez Louis’s.”

“Where did you get that lovely thing?” Gideon demanded and made a grab for it, but Raoul neatly slipped the credit stick back into his pocket.

“It’s my emergency back-up account.”

“One you hid from Iason’s clever probes? How fiendishly deceptive of you.” Gideon scowled as he glanced through his PPC. “He seems to have located all of mine, damn him.”

Raoul decided not to tell Gideon that Iason was well aware of this particular account, as the Blondie had been the one to help him set it up and keep it off the main sensors. Only Raoul or Iason could access the safe where the credit stick and his other portfolios were kept, so he assumed, as it was Iason who had slipped him the credit stick while they were talking, as a gesture of letting Raoul know that account was untouched.

“Well, do you intend to make it worth *my* while?” Raoul asked, and slowly smiled as Gideon patted his ass. Gideon had always been an outrageous flirt.

“Depends on what I get to order at Chez Luis.”

“Why, you can have anything on the menu, dear brother.”

Gideon laughed. “Then let’s go eat.”

Chapter 25

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki wakes up in new surroundings and is not happy.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks everyone who has reviewed, I really love reading them and look forward to more. A little bit of emotional angst for you now. Please enjoy.

Riki was dozing when the door to his hospital room opened and Iason Mink swept in. He eased up in bed, about to give the Blondie a taste of his mind, and found himself scooped into strong arms.

“Where have you been? What the fuck are you doing? Do you have any idea...” Riki’s words were smothered as Iason covered his mouth in a hard hungry kiss that left him dizzy and weak. “I’m mad at you,” he murmured, even as he curled into Iason’s chest.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.” Iason nodded to Yielia. “Collect your things, we’re leaving.”

“Where are we going, and hey...put me down! I can walk for fuck’s sake!”

“Riki, please,” Iason said quietly and stared into the flashing dark eyes of the man he adored. “Shut up.”

Riki gaped at him as they stepped out into the hall and were immediately met by the security guard.

“Lord Mink! The pet...I mean Sir Riki has not yet been discharged by the...” The guard swallowed and stepped back as he met the red, furious

eyes of an enraged Blondie.

Iason allowed everyone who looked his way to see his anger, his full flowing rage and the power behind it as he strode down the hall to the elevators. His eyes had returned to an icy blue once they hit the lobby and they were given a wide berth, until they got to the main entrance doors, where a gurney had been pushed in front of them. Laying leisurely across the gurney was Kanin.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home,” Iason growled. “Move. Now.”

“You don’t have a home. It went kablooie!” Kanin’s hands shot up in the air. “And that man has a severe concussion and needs to stay here.”

“I will take care of him.”

“You are many things, Lord Mink, but you are not medically trained.” Kanin hopped off the gurney and smiled. “Now, let’s turn around and...”

Iason stepped up to him so they were almost nose to nose, capturing poor Riki between two powerful and stubborn Elites. “If you do not get out of my way, I will crush you into a bright blue stain on the floor. Now *move*.”

“Nope. My patient. My priority.”

Riki and Yielia, fascinated by anyone who stood up to Iason, could only watch as the two alphas stood their ground.

“I will not tell you again, Kanin.”

“Good, I’m tired of hearing you blather on.” Kanin glanced around as his staff started moving closer to him for support. “You’re the top dog of Tanagura, Iason, but this is my territory and I have a lot of bitches.”

“I am taking Riki out of here.”

“Not without medical supervision.”

“Then by all means,” Iason growled darkly. “Do come along, you interfering bastard.”

Kanin smiled. “Well, since you asked so nicely.” He held out his hand and a young nurse pushed his medical bag into it while the others cleared the gurney from the door. “See how nice it is when you compromise.”

“Speaking of compromise,” Riki began as they headed outside. “Can you tell him to put me down?”

“No!”

Riki flinched when they both spoke at once. Sighing, he lay his head on Iason’s shoulder as they left the hospital. He dozed on the car ride to their destination, and when he opened his eyes he could smell the sea.

He sat up, slowly and realized that he was in a room, on a wide bed, and the ocean breeze was coming from outside his open window. Were they back at the beach house, he wondered? But Iason said that someone else owned that place where they had once stayed. This was definitely not Tanagura or Midas, and even as he slid back the blankets covering him and started to slide out of bed, Cal appeared in the doorway of the room.

“Dr. Kanin’s instructions are for you to stay in bed,” the young mad ordered mildly as he stepped into the room.

Riki ignored him and stood up. “Where’s Iason?” he demanded as he reached for a robe that had been placed at the end of the bed and tried to shrug away the sense of *déjà vu*. It wasn’t all that long ago that he’d woken up in similar circumstances, after he’d walked to his death to stay with Iason at Dana Bahn.

“Master Iason has returned to Eos.”

Riki paused in tying the robe. “What do you mean he’s returned to Eos? Then why am I still here?”

“It was decided it would be more beneficial for you to recover here, away from the stress and that currently unstable environment.”

Riki's fury at being left behind quickly transmuted to a staggering despair. Iason had left him to go back to Eos, alone? What the fuck? "Where are my clothes?"

"Dr. Kanin wants you to stay in bed, Riki."

"I'm fine, Cal. It's just a few scrapes and bruises."

"Dr. Kanin says..."

"I don't give two sweet rat fucks what he says where the fuck are my clothes!"

Cal didn't even flinch. Instead he walked over to the wall and pressed his hand to a panel. It slid open and revealed a closet full of new clothes. "Nothing survived from the collapse, but I have purchased a new attire for you. I hope you will find it acceptable."

Riki stalked to the closet and grabbed a pair of dark jeans, socks and a T-shirt, barely looking at them before sliding them over his body. His head still hurt, and so did the rest of him, but damned if he was going to admit it. Iason had no right going back to Eos alone. Someone had just tried to kill him, for Fuck's sake. What was he thinking?

"Boots? Jacket?"

Cal indicated the lower shelf of the closet where several pairs of boots and shoes lined the interior, then stepped out of the room and returned a moment later as Riki was shoving on a pair of knee high black boots.

"I could not find a leather jacket similar to the one you had, so I purchased a standard cloth one." Cal held out a dark black and white jacket with gold trim and Riki snatched it from him.

"Keys."

"Keys?"

“Car keys, Cal.” Riki held out his hand impatiently as the young man continued to stare at him, blankly.

“I don’t have any car keys, Riki. Master Iason drove us here, then he and Dr. Kanin left.”

“My bike then? Did Iason bring my bike?” That was in a separate garage from the condo, so it should have been undamaged.

“No. We have no form of transportation.” Cal would not admit that there was an emergency vehicle in a hidden garage beneath the house. Iason had told him to keep Riki here and that was what he would do.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I am not.”

“You expect me to believe Iason just left us here without any way to leave?”

“Where would you go, if you were to leave?”

“Back to fucking Eos!”

“No. You are to stay here, Riki.”

“I’m not staying here.” Riki pushed past him and stormed out into the large living area, ignoring Yielia completely as he headed for the door.

No, this wasn’t the house they had been at before, Riki realized, because there was nothing but sand and ocean to be seen. Not even an outline of a city or factory was anywhere in sight. He walked around the house and saw again, sand and water. What the ever-loving fuck? Were they on an island? A fucking island in the middle of the motherfucking ocean? As there was only one large body of water on all of Amoï, he didn’t see how it was possible and he didn’t recall ever knowing of any islands in the middle of the damn thing.

Then he noticed a small blinking light almost buried in the sand. He walked towards it, put his hand close to it and came back with a slight jolt. A security fence, he realized, spotting similar lights every few feet across the sand. And if there was a security fence that meant that what he was seeing was probably a hologram or something, hiding what was inside of it, and hiding them from outsiders.

Walking back around the house he headed for the water, bent and touched it to prove that it was real, but he couldn't see how far out it went or where the security field might be. Perhaps there wasn't one, it was an ocean after all, unless someone had a boat they couldn't very well swim in.

Climbing back up the steps to the front of the house he found Cal standing on the porch, waiting for him. He held out his hand. "Give it to me."
"Give what to you?"

"The holo-field emitter. I know you have it, now give it to me."

Cal looked him straight in the eye and said. "No."

Riki blinked in surprise. "Then lower the fucking field so I can get out of here."

"No."

"Cal!" He was surprised by the young man's resolve, considering how close they had become. But, experience made him remember that posturing and threats had never worked with Cal, Riki changed tactics. "I thought you were my friend?"

"Am I your friend, Riki?"

"Yeah. I mean, of course!"

"Then as my friend, please don't ask me to go against Master Iason's wishes."

"Look, he won't know you gave it to me. I'll tell him I stole it from you, or I beat you up and made you give it to me."

“Riki, please don’t do that. If you make any attempt to leave I will have to restrain you and I would hate to do that as much as you would hate having it done.” And in his current condition, with his arm the way it was, Cal would have to use the stun wand in his pocket, which he was loathe to do.

Riki’s eyes widened in shock. What the hell? Cal was usually on his side of things. Hurt, his temper darkened. “I’d wipe the floor with you, Cal, and we both know it.”

“No,” Cal returned resigned. “But we would hurt each other in the attempt and I do wish to hurt you.”

Riki didn’t have time for this. He strode forward and made a grab for Cal’s arm, but the former furniture neatly sidestepped the attempt. He made another grab and Cal knocked Riki’s arm back.

“Give me the damn holo-emitter, Cal. I’m not playing here!”

“I will not disobey my master.”

“He’s not your Master anymore!” Riki lunged and was astounded when Cal once again avoided him.

Fear for Iason’s life made him desperate, and desperation turned to rage. He curled his fist and swung out, pulling it at the last second as he remembered who it was he was aiming at, but Cal ducked and he felt the jolt of the stun wand hid him in the shoulder; his arm went excruciatingly numb.

“Give me the code! I have to get back to Eos!” Riki screamed, furious that Cal had actually used a wand on him and in pain he clutched his arm. He never thought he’d hear himself say he willingly wanted to go back to that Godforsaken place, but the idea of Iason there alone and without anyone to protect him scared him shitless. “I’m ordering you to do this!”

Cal’s heart was breaking as he watched Riki stagger and cradle his arm. “I do not take orders from you,” he returned quietly and slid the wand back into his pocket. Riki had gone so pale and was still recovering, but he’d had

no other choice. If Riki's fist had connected he'd be unconscious and the mongrel would have found the keys and the decoder in his pocket.

Riki's glared at Cal. "I thought you were my friend!"

"I thought I was too."

"As my friend you should do this for me!"

"As my friend you cannot ask me to betray my Master!" Cal shot back.

"He's not..."

"I am in Iason Mink's employ. I am his ward, and your teacher and he *is* my Master, regardless of the circumstances, until he dismisses me!"

Riki's head was throbbing, his arm stinging and his legs shaky. As his anger started to fade into remorse he leaned against the railings of the porch. "Why can't you just help me out here? I just..."

"I will not help you go back where you can be hurt. I will not lend aid in your useless, prideful self-destruction. I almost lost you both at Dana Bahn, and now again in Eos. I will not allow it to happen a third time. I *can't* go through that again, Riki, and if you were really my friend you wouldn't ask me to!"

Riki stared at Cal who had lost several shades of colour in his face and his lovely eyes swam with unshed tears. "Cal..."

"Stop thinking about yourself for once!"

Riki was not the only one feeling regret at their altercation, but for Cal, he knew that he could not show remorse or apologize or Riki would press the advantage. He was already furious and hurt that Riki had forced him to use the wand; that he had pushed things that far.

"Think about the people who worry about you. Think about Master Iason who loves you beyond anything that could be written or sung about. What do you think will happen to him if you die? What do you think you will

happen to me and Yielia? What are we to do if you are no longer here with us? What about us, damn you!"

Riki was stunned silent and so, apparently was Cal as he realized how far over the line he had gone. The young man quickly covered his mouth with a hand that trembled with shameful emotion.

"I...Forgive me I..." He shook his head, realizing that he suddenly felt ill to his stomach for having revealed so much. "I can't do it, Riki. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Riki rose, took a step forward as Cal bolted back inside the house, almost knocking Yielia over as she stepped out.

"Iason is calling for you on the house terminal," she stated quietly.

"Why haven't you healed his arm?" Riki demanded as he entered the house and followed her to the terminal in the living area, relieved he was starting to get some feeling back in his arm.

"Like you he is stubborn and foolhardy, and will not permit it."

"Whatever." Riki engaged the terminal and Iason's image appeared on screen. "What do you want?" he growled.

"You're angry."

"Damn right I'm angry. What are you thinking leaving me here? You had no right, Iason, now come and get me and..."

"No."

Riki glared at him mutinously.

"It is better that you remain there, for the moment, Riki. I cannot have you in Eos until I find out what is going on. You are safe there."

"If you can be there, so can I. We can figure this out together, we can..."

“Riki. I love you, however, I cannot afford to be worrying about you while I am dealing with this. Stay there, enjoy the water. I know you like to swim.”

“I’m not gonna fucking swim! You think I’m just gonna kick back and relax while you’re there with a fucking threat hanging over your head? Someone tried to kill us, both of us, and I have a stake in this too damn it. Bring me back so I can help you!”

“You are helping me, Riki, by not being here.”

“God damn it!” Riki ran his hands through his hair, furious. “You don’t get to pull this shit! I’m not your obedient pet anymore, Iason...”

“You were rarely obedient, even when you were a pet, Riki.”

“You know what I mean. We should face this together! Like we did with Orphe, like on Avalon and...”

“No. That is precisely why you cannot be here, Riki.” Orphe had almost destroyed both of them because Iason was blinded by rage at the idea of his brother having Riki, hurting Riki. It was the same on Avalon. While they held Riki at their mercy he could do nothing to risk Riki’s safety. “With you gone I can do what I must do. Why can’t you understand that?”

A cold wind blew into Riki’s heart and settled there. “Yeah, sure. I get it. You only want me around when I’m convenient.”

“Riki, that is not it at all!”

“Well, I’m not a fucking toy, Iason. You wanna leave me here, fine, but you’d best be prepared for the consequences because I *will* find a way out of this fucking prison and when I do, I am gone. Do you hear me? We are done and I am gone for good. So you have one chance, Iason. You get your ass back here by midnight and take me home or you won’t ever see me again.”

“I will return when this is finished, Riki. I love you and I’ll call you tom...”

Riki terminated the connection before Iason could finish speaking. “Liar,” he whispered and realized he was shaking with hurt and fear. “Fucking liar.”

“Riki.”

“Not now, Yielia.”

She walked in and touched the arm that Cal had stunned. Riki let her take the pain away because he was battling back much worse pain.

“He doesn’t want me.”

“Of course he does. He only means to keep you safe,” she assured as she slid her hands towards his back, knowing that he still had discomfort and bruising there, then sighing when he pulled away. “Riki. Please don’t fight with your young friend.”

Riki glanced at her, still dazed and trapped in his own anger and despair. Young friend? Did she mean Cal? “He’s not my friend.”

“Of course he is.”

“He used a wand on me! You don’t do that to your friends!”

“He was trying to protect you and you tried to hurt him. He was defending himself, and you know it.” She stepped closer, cupped his cheek so he would turn to look at her. “He loves you, we all do.”

Riki thought of Iason. “No. All of you don’t.” But, he lowered his eyes because Cal probably did and he had crossed the line. “Fuck.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Indeed.”

Riki rubbed his head. “My head hurts, Yielia. It hurts so bad.”

“Do you want me to help you?” She realized how proud her Prince was, and how much agony he was in to even consider asking her to help him, but she hoped he would.

He shook his head, winced and caught her hand as she sadly let it slip off his shoulder. “Later, okay? I’ll let you do it later.”

She smiled, squeezed his hand. “As you wish.”

Riki sighed heavily, then turned towards the back of the house. He wanted the pain for now, deserved it for what he did to Cal.

He bypassed the room he had been in, found the room beside it empty, then knocked on the closed door on the other side of the hall. It took a moment for the door to open and Cal stared at him.

“Did you need something?”

The bland expression on Cal’s face made Riki’s guilt even worse and that pissed him off.

“Are you gonna give me the remote?” Riki asked quietly.

“No. I am not.”

“Fuck.” Riki sighed, pushed past Cal and entered the large bedroom. “Look, I guess I’m sorry for, you know, taking a swing at you.”

Cal left the door open but did not move any further into the room. Instead, he turned, clasped his hands behind his back and faced Riki. “Apology accepted.”

Seeing Cal’s stiff demeanor Riki realized that he’d done more damage than he’d thought. He turned and walked back to the younger man. “Okay, fine. I said it, now pull the stick out of your ass.”

“I am currently unable to comply. Did you require anything else of me? Sir?”

While Cal’s voice remained politely neutral, Riki heard the starch. The young Furniture was not going to let him off easy, which proved how much Riki had hurt him. Normally Riki didn’t care about what other people thought of him or whether he had friends or enemies. That sort of surface

relationship could change on a dime in Ceres, but he realized he did care about what Cal thought about him. He didn't want Cal to be angry at him, or hurt anymore.

A half assed apology wasn't going to cut it this time, and they wouldn't be able to wave it off as they had other arguments. This called for a more extreme measure, which meant his pride was going to take a hit. Shit.

"I'm sorry, Cal," Riki offered sincerely and when Cal didn't so much as blink, Riki gritted his teeth and got down on one knee, something he had never done for anyone. "I was an asshole for coming at you like that. I am really sorry. You are my friend. I want you to still be my friend."

"You hurt me," Cal said quietly.

"I never even laid a hand..." Riki began but then realized that Cal was not referring to a physical pain. "Yeah. I'm really sorry." Between his throbbing head and his fear and frustration with Iason Riki could feel his eyes starting to sting with emotions. He lowered his other knee then sat on the floor. "This has been such shit day."

"It has." Cal finally relented at seeing Riki so miserable and crouched beside him. "I'm sorry I used the wand on you."

"I'm sorry I took a swing at you."

"I'm sorry I raised my voice."

"I'm sorry I was such a dick." A single tear slipped out of Riki's left eye. "Fuck. Aw fuck."

"Oh, Riki." Cal knew it was against protocol, but went with his instincts and slid his arm around Riki, pulled him close. He had no doubt that between the explosion, collapse and now a feeling of abandonment Riki was having a very, very shit day.

"He left me. He fucking left me!"

"He will be back, Riki. He hasn't left forever."

“I don’t care. I hate him.” Riki was ashamed when he curled into Cal’s chest and his fingers gripped the young man’s tunic. “I should be with him. What if he dies? What if they kill him and I’m not there? What if....?”

“Master Iason is the strongest person I know, Riki. He will be fine and he will come back for you.”

Riki shook his head and felt himself sliding. Shit, why did his head hurt so much and why was he suddenly so tired. “My head hurts.”

Cal adjusted himself on the floor so Riki could rest his head on his lap. “I know. Sleep, Riki. You’ll feel better after, and I’ll make you some chocolate pudding for dessert.”

“Yeah.” Riki’s eyes closed of their own volition. Just a quick nap he thought. He’d feel better after that and then he’d have the energy to figure out how to get back to Eos; back to Iason. “Okay.

Cal watched as his charge, his friend drifted off to sleep, then glanced up as Yielo paused in the doorway of the room. “Help him, please.”

“He does not want me too.”

“He doesn’t know what he wants, or what’s best for him.” Cal suppressed the urge to pull Riki’s hair away from his face. “I am asking you to do it.”

“The faster he recovers the faster he will try to leave.”

“I know.” Cal looked down at Riki again. “But I can’t stand to see him in pain.”

“Will you allow me to heal your arm?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Cal smiled at her. “Because I can use it as leverage to keep Riki here.”

“You didn’t appeal much to his sympathy earlier.”

“I will now that he’s tried to hit me.”

Yiela nodded in approval, then stepped in. “You are a wise one, young Cal.” She crouched down and placed her hands upon Riki’s head.

Chapter 26

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason calls Raoul in for a consultation.

Raoul opened his eyes as his wrist unit beeped. When he glanced at the readout and saw it was an incoming from Katze, he bolted up in the wide bed. Throwing back the sheets, he reached for his robe and then heard the figure next to him ask.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

A large hand snaked out and grabbed Raoul by the waist, but Raoul shook it off.

“Not now!” he hissed and stalked out of the bedroom to take the call.

After he and Gideon had gone for a meal, they returned to Raoul’s home to discuss the issue with Iason, but after more wine and far more flirting on Gideon’s part, they had ended up having sex. Raoul could not even blame the wine as a Blondie could not get drunk! He didn’t know what had come over him, other than this fierce, helpless need to fuck someone and Gideon had been more than willing.

He shook it off and opened the channel on his communicator to accept the call. “Yes, what is it?”

“Did I wake you?” Katze asked, taking in the smooth, naked chest peeking out from beneath the dark green robe Raoul wore, as well as the unusual messy state of his hair.

“No. It was a busy day so I was just taking a nap.” Where he had been very busy fucking his brother and breaking Jupiter’s laws, again. He felt an odd

sensation creep into his chest as Katze's eyes narrowed on him. "W...what did you want?"

Sweet Jupiter? Did he just stutter? How was this possible and what the hell was this weird sensation crawling through his system?

"Iason needs to see you."

"Yes. Right. Fine. Now?" Raoul's eyes widened as his ability to speak completely left him.

"Yes, if you're available. Your second lab, in an hour?"

"Fine. Good."

"I'll let him know." Katze paused. "You might want to comb your hair first."

"Katze?" Raoul asked even as his hand went immediately to his wild looking locks. He had the sudden urge to apologize and he had no idea what for. What in the world? Blondies didn't apologize! "How...is your ankle? Are you still going to therapy?"

"I haven't today, no time, but yeah, I'm still going."

"Don't overtax yourself. You are still recovering."

"I'm fine, Raoul."

"You're not fine, you were badly injured. Why don't you come by my apartment and I'll check you out?"

"That's not necessary. Good-bye..."

"Have you had anymore black outs?" Raoul didn't understand why he wasn't just letting the call end. What in the name of Jupiter was wrong with him?

Katze's eyes closed off and his face drew blank. "I don't know what you're talking about. Goodbye, Sir."

"Wait, Katze..."

"That sounded almost like a lover's spat."

Raoul stiffened as long arms came around him and he realized what had put that look on Katze's face. Shit. "Let go of me, Gideon."

Gideon's arms only squeezed Raoul harder, as he pulled his brother back against his bare chest. He had only taken the time to pull on his trousers before he had gone looking for the beautiful Blondie. "That isn't what you were saying a couple of hours ago."

Raoul pushed him away as Peter appeared.

"Would you like something to eat or drink, Sirs?"

"I'd like a red wine," Gideon began but Raoul shook his head.

"No, you're leaving. Now. Peter, ready my vehicle, I have to go out."

"Certainly, Sir."

Raoul stalked back into his bedroom, tossed off his robe and reached for a set of blue trousers, but before he could pull them on, Gideon had followed him inside and had gripped his cock.

"Why the rush? It's still early in the evening."

"I have an appointment!" Raoul shrugged Gideon away and pulled on his trousers. "This was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened."

Gideon's smiling face faded. "Is Iason the only one good enough for you?"

"It's not about that..." Raoul began and suddenly found himself face down on the bed, with his slacks down around his ankles and a giant cock plunging into his ass. "Gideon, stop!" He pushed up to his knees which

made Gideon's thrusts even deeper and he gasped. Sweet Jupiter, how he had missed this!

"You don't seem to want me to stop, Raoul," Gideon smiled as Raoul started to push back as hard as he was pushing forward.

Raoul closed his eyes and let himself be taken, as he had taken Gideon earlier, but when he did he had a vision of the exact moment, only with a slight addition. He pictured Katze, beautiful, pale and naked lying beneath him as he fucked him with enthusiasm. Oh yes, he thought, it would feel so good to be penetrated while he was also thrusting into someone. It would feel incredible!

"Damn, Raoul! You are pulling me in like a snatcher plant!"

Gideon's voice broke apart Raoul's fantasy but did nothing to suppress his sudden urges. In a vicious, nearly brutal move, he reversed their positions so that Gideon was tossed across the bed and being pummeled by Raoul from behind.

"Oh, now we're talking!" Gideon chuckled as Raoul's massive cock pierced him and started to thrust with abandon. "I knew I could talk you into seconds!"

"Shut up!" Raoul growled, wrenched Gideon up to his knees then leaned forward and grabbed the Blondie's cock. He was still envisioning Katze and every time Gideon spoke it interrupted his fantasy.

Gideon was lost against the sensations of being stroked and fucked at the same time and he soon reached his peak. Raoul slammed into him three more times before he too found release.

Raoul barely allowed himself a second of recovery before he was moving off of his brother and returning to his closet. He grabbed the slacks he had initially pulled on, then tossed them aside as he had torn them in half when he'd moved to take Gideon beneath him. He reached in for another pair the color of soft, lilting smoke.

Gideon flopped dramatically onto his back, then propped himself up on his elbows and grinned at Raoul. “Well, *that* was fun.”

“It was also the last time.” Raoul slid into a tunic and fastened it, quickly, ignoring the fact that his hands were shaking. Usually Peter would help him dress, but there was no time, especially now that Gideon had made him late leaving. “Jupiter has forbidden such things. You know what She did to Iason after She found out about our liaison. Do you want to have your memories subverted as well?”

Gideon sat up, reached for his shirt. “She had no right to do that to him.”

“She has every right, She is Jupiter.” Raoul grabbed a long jacket from the other side of his closet and allowed Gideon to take it and hold it out for him. He slid his arms through, then selected a pair of white gloves from a drawer that contained a dozen identical ones. “Even after She had played with his mind, Iason still knew something had happened between us.” Raoul realized that if not for Riki’s accusations Iason might never have remembered the full extent of their previous relationship. He alone had held onto the memory, perhaps for longer than he should have as it had made for some arguments between he and Iason when Riki first came to stay.

“Why did She not do the same to you?”

“She cannot.” Raoul said and ended the discussion. Because he was often the one who had to tamper with the minds of others, it was necessary to always have his full memories intact. She could not tamper with his mind because She needed his skill for others.

“Raoul.” Gideon straightened from putting on his boots and caught Raoul’s arm. “I do not regret this. Perhaps we were overtaken by impulse, but it was a lovely interlude and I will not regret or forget it.”

Raoul’s stance softened and he placed his hand to Gideon’s cheek. “Nor shall I.” He leaned in and kissed Gideon softly on the lips. “Let us keep it as a memory, and not speak of it again, lest you risk ruination.”

Gideon lowered his eyes and nodded. “You are a kind being, brother, though many think otherwise. I would wish no harm to come to you.”

Raoul was taken aback by Gideon’s sudden seriousness. “Thank you for that. Now, I must go. Have your wine if you must, then go home, Gideon. We can afford no further gossip about Blondies.”

Gideon grabbed his own cloak as his expression returned to his usual, playfulness. “I feel so used!” he tossed as he walked back to the living area with his brother. “So...” He smiled slowly and once again patted Raoul’s ass. “Thoroughly used.”

Raoul chuckled and slapped Gideon’s hand away as Peter appeared to open the door for them. “You are incorrigible.”

“Oh dear brother, you really have no idea!”

When Raoul finally made it to his destination, he sat in his vehicle several minutes after he’d switched off the engine. He glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror, grimaced and quickly patted and smoothed at his hair; luckily that was really all it took to restore it to order. He then reached into the small compartment between the seats and removed a bottle of scent. He applied it to his throat and wrists, then dropped it back into the compartment, and finally opened the door to his vehicle.

He wasn’t primping for Katze’s sake, he told himself as he uncoded the doors to his club and stepped into the dim interior. It was still too early for the club to be open, but he had seen the other vehicle parked at the side of the building and knew that Iason was already here. He was a Blondie and a Blondie always strived to look his best. He paused and looked over his reflection in the wall of mirrors behind the bar, smoothed his hair once more until it was completely perfect and all evidence of Gideon’s fingers had been removed.

Walking through the empty club, he opened the door that led to the basement storage, and then the wall panel that led to the stairs leading to his lower laboratory. Iason was waiting for him, but Katze was not and he felt a surge of disappointment, then anger, but he covered it swiftly with guile.

“Have you come to foreclose?” he teased as he secured the door behind him.

“I want you to look at these,” Iason stated and handed Raoul the reports from the surgeon who had worked on his back.

Raoul perused them scowling. “What are these, exactly, and whose patient’s examinations are they?”

“Mine.”

Raoul’s head shot up in surprise. “You underwent this kind of procedure without authority from Jupiter?”

“It had to be done.” Iason rose from the chair where he had been sitting and indicated one of the scans. “Foreign organic materials,” he stated in barely veiled anger. “They’re all over my body, Raoul. They’re every damn where and I have no recollection of how they got there!”

“Could it be a virus? Some sort of microscopic or muted species you picked up on Avalon?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what it is but it’s inside of me and I never knew it was.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“Have you shown these to Jupiter?”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

Raoul slammed the papers down on one of his examination tables. “Damn it, Iason, stop saying that. You’re a Blondie, you know everything!”

“I thought so too, only... I was going to tell Her, when I went to ask for Her seal, but She was...Off.”

“Off? You mean She refused to see you?”

“No, I mean...” Iason growled in frustration and started to pace, something he rarely did. Raoul was right, he always knew how to handle any situation, but this, this was something beyond his ability to solve. “I told her about the reports of erratic behavior of our brothers.”

“What did She say?”

“She asked about Riki.”

Raoul blinked as he tried to process that piece of information. “She what?” He must have heard Iason incorrectly.

“She completely ignored the situation and asked me if Riki was alright and when I would bring him to see Her.” Iason ran a hand over his face. “Do you have anything to drink in this place?”

Raoul moved to the wall, pressed his hand to the panel and a small mini bar slid out. He poured them each a tumbler of hundred-year-old scotch. “Here.” He handed one of the glasses to Iason, who was obviously agitated. “Sit down and start at the beginning.”

Iason downed half the glass, sat and explained the details of his meeting with Jupiter. “I could sense Her withdrawal, Raoul,” he continued once the story was out. “There was a barrier between us that I have never felt before. She has been in seclusion for a couple of weeks now, would not see even me when I approached.”

Raoul thought about his tryst with Gideon. “Do you think we, all us Blondies, are being affected by whatever is happening with Jupiter?”

“I do not know, as I do not know what is happening with Her.”

Raoul glanced down at the reports. “What do you intend to do about these anomalies? Can they be removed?”

“They can, Dr. Madsyn assured me they were implanted surgically, but as I still do not know why they were placed there or how they got inside me, therefore he is concerned about doing so.”

“Yes, it may cause more trouble to remove them, as we don’t know their purpose.” Raoul sat in a chair opposite Iason, considered. “You mentioned before you had gaps in your memory. Time differentials. Could these be related to these secret surgeries?”

“I can think of no other way.”

“When did the time lapses start?”

“After I returned from Avalon.”

“Could they have done this to you?”

“I don’t think they have the knowledge of a Blondie’s anatomy to do so, let alone to bypass my systems so I am unaware of what is being done.”

“You fell into the Great Sleep while you were there. It is possible it was done then?”

“No. Katze and the Onyx were with me the entire time I slept. No one from Avalon even saw me once I went under.”

“Is that what they told you?”

“Yes. I have no reason to doubt Katze’s word.”

“What about the other one. You were with him for awhile before Katze found you, were you not?”

“Yes, but again I do not...”

“He is an Onyx, Iason..” Raoul reminded. “Part of a race that were destroyed due to their instability. It is possible that he did this to you?”

“For what reason?”

“Revenge, perhaps? His kind were eradicated by Jupiter, and essentially replaced by our kind. Perhaps he feels destroying you, Jupiter’s favored son, would retaliate against what Jupiter did to him and his kind.”

Iason considered it, but it didn’t sound right. Shiao had risked his own wellbeing by linking with Iason, to keep him from going mad while in the Deep Sleep. It made little sense for the Onyx to take such risks if he was filled with that kind of hatred.

“You need to talk to him. Do you know where he is?”

“I did,” Iason muttered, grimly, but the people he’d had watching Shiao and Guy, as a precautionary measure only, had advised him that both had disappeared several weeks ago and he could find no trace of them. “They seemed to have disappeared.”

“That is surely the act of a guilty party then.”

“Yes, possibly.” If Shiao was the only one who could answer such questions, he’d have to put more effort into finding them, “I will look into it.”

“Has anyone come forward to claim responsibility for the crash yet?”

“No, they still have time.”

“Do you really believe that a Blondie would do this, Iason?” Raoul asked, concerned. “We can be obnoxious and temperamental, but homicidal seems a step above even our status.”

“Orphe had no problem with such tendencies, and as you know, our brothers have been acting strangely.”

“Yes.” Raoul stared down into his drink, then took several sips as he wondered where Katze was and if his ankle was bothering him. “Could it be a pathogen?”

Iason’s eyebrow rose. “A chemical reactive?” he inquired curious. “The sensors for our detoxification protocol would have picked up on that,

wouldn't they?"

"Not necessarily." Raoul proceeded to tell Iason about what had happened with his lab animals. "As yet," he continued while Iason absorbed the facts. "I have not ascertained the cause. I suspected, momentarily, that it was an auditory attack, but even that has been ruled out."

"What would affect animals, even humans, would not affect us, Raoul. We have far too many filtering systems."

"I am aware of that, and yet you have organic material growing inside of you and our brothers are acting strangely. I can think of no other reason."

"It is like a parasite," Iason mused. "Yet it seems to have only infected me. Or rather, was only implanted inside me."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps this unknown organic has also affected our brothers. It may explain their recent behavior." Raoul thought back to the crazed lust that had overtaken him with Gideon. "I wonder?" He rose and went to his lab equipment and pulled off his glove. He pricked his finger so the liquid dropped onto a slide then he settled it beneath a microscope.

"What are you looking for?" Iason asked, wandering over.

"I'm not sure." He caught Iason's hand, the Blondie had sensed Raoul's theory and had already removed his glove, and did the same thing for a different slide. He placed both samples under the scope and examined them. "Whatever it is isn't affecting your Blood-coolant, it is the same as mine."

"Then what..." Iason paused in his question as Raoul handed him a laser scalpel, then removed his jacket and lifted his tunic at the waist. "Raoul. I am not going to cut you."

"How else can we see if the material inside of you is in me?"

Iason scowled and placed his hand, the one that still wore a glove, against the pale skin of Raoul's hip. "I am unfamiliar with this instrument or procedure. What if it scars or injures you?"

“Just do as I tell you to and it will be fine.”

Iason followed Raoul’s instructions and cut a small patch, no bigger than his thumbnail, just below and to the left of Raoul’s spine.

“Now get that instrument there on the wall and push the tip of it in.”

Iason walked over and selected a small, pointed instrument, then returned and did as he was told.

“That’s far enough,” Raoul assured and awkwardly reached for the controls to his computer console. After a few keystrokes an image appeared on screen, an image that looked very much like the internal endoskeleton of a Blondie.

“What is this?” Iason asked, fascinated as he watched the outline of the tip of the probe move and turn beneath his brother’s flesh. “Does it cause you discomfort?”

“Minimal. It’s a 3D Internal analyzer I’ve been working on. It has a 360-degree range and the scans will appear on screen to show me...” Raoul flinched as the tool started turning in the opposite direction. “What there is to see.”

After another minute or so, Iason had permission to remove the instrument and taped a patch of Nu-skin across the incision, knowing the synthetic flesh should grow over the mark and hopefully leave Raoul’s body as flawless as ever.

“Get me another scotch, would you?” Raoul asked as he settled in his chair and started working his console.

Iason refilled both their glasses, pulled up a stool and settled beside his brother. “Did you get something to eat?”

Roul grinned. “Yes, thanks for that.” His smile faded as he recalled what happened earlier. It wasn’t that he regretted having sex with Gideon, it was

simply not something he had ever considered doing and now that he had, he felt guilty about it.

“What is it?”

Raoul shook his head and concentrated on his console. “Just thinking of too many things at once. I need to filter out some of the noise. Ah, see here?”

Iason leaned forward as an image appeared on the screen, showing the inner workings of Raoul’s body in and about his spinal area. “It’s so clear,” he murmured as Raoul hit another key and a 3D hologram of the picture appeared before them, one that could be turned, tilted or adjusted for view. “This is wonderful, Raoul. You must market this for our medical departments.”

“Perhaps, but for now let’s see if there is anything out of the ordinary.” Raoul studied the hologram from all possible sides and angles. “I don’t see anything unusual.”

“No.” Iason came to the same conclusion. “Then the organic material may simply be affecting me, but it does not explain what is happening with our brothers.”

“No, and I don’t think they will be as willing to submit to examinations to find out.”

“Then Shiao is my only avenue for answers.”

“It would appear so.” Raoul closed off the hologram and it disappeared between them. “How is Riki?”

“Furious with me.”

“Why?”

Iason shook his head and rose. “He feels he should be here with me.”

“Isn’t he?”

“No. He’s away from Eos.”

“Where is he?”

“Somewhere safe.” Iason turned back to Raoul. “I need you to do me another favor, Raoul.”

Raoul scratched his chin. “Your tab is already quite high, Iason.”

“I am aware, and I will pay it back in full, but if you could casually mention where I am staying to the others...”

“Where are you staying?” Raoul began then held up a hand. “No. You know what, I don’t what to know and why do you want the others to know if you suspect...” His eyes narrowed on his brother. “You want me to set you up as bait. You expect them to make another attempt on your life.”

“I want this dealt with, Raoul. This is the fastest way...”

“And the most dangerous! No. I will not help you put yourself back in such danger.”

“A moment ago, you were not even sure it was another Blondie who caused the crash, now you refuse to mention such a small thing for fear one of them will come at me. You can’t have it both ways, Raoul. Make up your mind and do it quickly.”

“I *can* have it both ways. I am Raoul Am, I can have it any damn way I please, and regardless of my own opinions on the matter, if there is even a one percent chance that my dropping your location in front of anyone may lead to another attack, I absolutely refuse to help you.” Raoul rose and put his hand on Iason’s arm. “You are my brother, Iason. Do not ask me to put you in harms way.”

“You will not help me?”

“I will help you, of course I will, but not this way.” Raoul stepped back. “Perhaps your focus should be on the Onyx. Find him and get the answers you require, first then...”

“I cannot bring Riki back to Eos until this is resolved, Raoul. I will not put him in danger.”

“Yet you ask me to do the same for you! You ask me to be party to something that could get you killed!”

“I do not plan on letting anyone kill me, Raoul.”

“Then find another way for me to assist you in this!” Raoul closed his eyes for minute to reign in his anger, then open them again. “One of them may yet confess...”

“They will not.”

“You do not know that!”

“I do, because I don’t believe that they can confess. I believe whoever is behind this is in so deep that the idea of confession and facing the consequences does not even register with them.”

“How can you say that? Iason, what you’re describing is the psychology of a madman. It can’t be a Blondie, because we are incapable of such thoughts.”

“Orphe wasn’t. He let his greed and lust for power and his vendetta with me overpower his protocols, ruin his directives. He wasn’t a mad man, but he was still urged on by his hatred to hurt me. Why is it impossible to believe that any of us is not also capable of such feelings?”

“I admit, Orphe was the exception, but by that rule we must assume the culprit is also someone who hates you.”

“No, well, possibly, but I don’t believe they understand it as hate. I don’t think they’re fully aware of what they are feeling, or what they are doing.”

“Iason, you are not making any sense and if you believe that, then what was the point of the ultimatum?”

“The attempted murder of a Blondie is a very serious offence, Raoul. Many may consider it, but anyone who has put that consideration into action must be so sure of their goal, or so blinded by their own emotions, that they are not going to consider my little threat as anything more than a nuisance.”

“So, you aren’t going to take away everyone’s assets?” Raoul inquired curious, then his eyebrow rose. “You were watching for reactions. You weren’t looking for guilt but...”

“Innocence, or rather a lack of interest. Whoever did this must believe, truly believe that what they are doing is acceptable.”

“And in doing so,” Raoul continued. “They would not feel pressured by the threat or offended by it because they believe themselves to be above everyone else, possibly even Jupiter.”

“Yes.”

“That, makes an odd, strangely horrible, kind of sense, but...” Raoul paused as he thought back to the meeting and all the yelling and chaos that had ensued after Iason’s announcement. Someone who lacked a reaction to the news was... “Surely you do not believe I am responsible?”

“No, Raoul. I know it was not you behind the crash.”

“Then who...?” Raoul’s eyes widened as the truth dawned on him. “That’s not possible. Iason, that is completely impossible.”

“If you believe that, then help me. Do as I ask, let our brothers know where I am staying.”

Raoul stared at him as a thousand thoughts, suppositions, conclusions and horrific repercussions spun through his mind. He needed time, he realized. He needed time to investigate this...this idea. “You’re too close to this, Iason. I think...I think you should take Riki and go away for a while.”

“I will not run.”

“No, no I know that, but I think your time would be better served in finding the Onyx and getting the answers to what is happening to your body. I think that should be the priority.”

“And what do you intend to do while I am away, Raoul?”

“Whatever must be done.” Raoul held up his hand. “I will not...confront your suspect, but give me some time to find more proof, Iason. That person deserves a consideration of innocence before he is thrown to the wolves.”

Iason nodded. “Very well, you have until I find the Onyx and return, and then we will deal with this.”

Chapter 27

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason returns to the condo, Katze thinks about Raoul and Riki has some things to think about.

Iason stepped off the transfer platform into what had once been his condo. Most of the heavy debris had been cleared away and a field erected to contain the scene. A security person was posted just outside the field and he allowed Iason entrance to what remained of the interior.

While the heavier rubble had been hauled away, there was still dirt and ash and broken furniture from the three-level condo strewn across what was now the only floor. He had no doubt that most of his possessions had been destroyed.

“There is a lot of damage, Lord Mink.”

Iason turned to the technician, one of three that were on cleanup duty for the site. Iason nodded. “So it appears.” He caught sight of another person a few feet away pushing a broken chair into a large bin. “Will you leave me for a few moments?”

“Certainly, sir.” The tech spoke into his headpiece and then stepped outside of the shield. Two others joined him and Iason found himself alone.

This had been his home since he had been released from Jupiter’s care over a century ago. It was here that he found solace and comfort from those who did not understand him, and those who envied and despised him. He had always had respect, such was demanded of a Blondie, but he had rarely had trust or true companionship; it was difficult to be a friend to Jupiter’s favored son.

As he moved across the floor, stepping over or around the mess, he spotted the glitter of a golden frame. It was a painting, one of his first purchases and was now probably worth several billion credits. The frame was dirty and dented but the painting itself was remarkably intact. One of his favorites out of all of his collection and yet, he felt nothing at it's survival. Nothing at all. He dropped it back onto the floor and continued walking.

While his art collection had been one of his passions, it was not what he was here for. As he shifted and moved debris with an ease that the technicians who had been working there would have envied, he searched for his prize.

A long section of stairway stood, almost perfectly upright, against a smaller wall of debris, though the steps no longer led anywhere. Running his hand across what was left of the rail, he spotted something higher up, where the stair had been ripped apart, and a lone step stood motionless against a backdrop of only air. It was just out of his reach.

Looking around, he found his safe, nearly buried in a mass of wood and glass. Clearing the fragments off the tall square box, he crouched to enter his code and the door flipped open. Inside was money, clear boxes of sparkling gems and a short stack of important papers. He slid the papers inside his jacket pocket, and then pulled out only one other item, a small, round cock ring, the one that had been cut off of Riki at Dana Bahn, which Guy had so boldly presented to him in a box, before Iason ripped his arm off in fury. He slid the ring into his pocket, then pushed the safe over towards the partial stairway.

The hologram on the forest globe no longer worked, and the glass surrounding it had been broken, but he was sure that Riki could fix it. Iason plucked it from the stair and smiled down at the gift Carrie had given his pet. Perhaps this would allow Riki to forgive him for sending him away.

He hopped down off the safe and continued his search. There were some pieces of priceless sculpture, remarkably intact, and assortment of clothing which he would never wear again, glassware, furniture pieces and so forth. Some useless, some quite valuable, all a collection of several lifetimes, and he left it all on the floor with the rubble.

Beneath a chunk of what had been part of his sofa he found the worn black jacket he had been looking for. Riki's mongrel jacket, the one Riki had been wearing the first time Iason saw him. He lifted the jacket to his face, inhaled and was delighted that it still smelled of Riki. Moving a few more pieces of heavy debris that might have been part of his kitchen, he found Riki's gold pet chains. Riki would never wear them again, he was no longer a pet, and yet Iason found he couldn't leave them behind.

He searched for but could not find their mood bracelets or his broach. As he started back across the wide floor area toward the field entrance, his boot clinked against something and when he looked down he saw it was a dog's food bowl with the name Oscar written across it. He picked it up, wondering when Cal had named the beast. As he understood it, it had been the dog that had led rescuers to them, something about using its sense of smell and barking like a mad thing. Well, he supposed it did have it's uses then.

On a slow turn he surveyed what was left of his home, recalled some of the memories he held dear. On a whim, he decided to make one more, small memory, something he would look back on with fondness, and when he was finished with his task he picked up his treasures, tucked the dog bowl under his arm and stepped through the field entrance to find the security guard and the other technicians waiting. "Thank you, you may continue now."

"Would you like a bag for your findings, Sir?" One of the tech's asked as he stepped forward and offered a sealable cloth bag.

"Yes, that will do nicely." He started away then paused, turned back. "Whatever remains you have my permission to keep it."

The technicians glanced at each other, and it was the first one he had spoken to that said. "Thank you, Lord Mink."

They watched the Blondie walk away, then looked at each other again.

"That was a nice gesture," the security guard said and one of the techs grunted.

“What, are we gonna sell pieces of broken furniture as souvenirs? The whole place is a write off.”

“Yeah, typical Blondie,” the other said. “Here’s some worthless junk, take it and be grateful.”

“It was still a generous offer,” the head technician decided as they stepped through the field, stopped, and gaped at the open safe with piles of money and jewels inside, and surrounded by priceless works of art.

“Holy shit! We...we’re fucking rich!”

They surged forward, even as the security guard turned back to watch Iason Mink step aboard the elevated platform and fly away.

Katze entered his Apathia apartment, secured the door and dropped onto his plush, leather sofa. He tossed his crutches to the floor and winced as he pulled his legs up to lay across the cushions.

He was exhausted, and it pissed him off. He had gone without sleep before and it rarely bothered him, but the added exertion of using crutches and standing on one foot for so many hours at a time had left him drained and in a ridiculous amount of pain.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a small packet of powder and called to his small house-droid. “Spot. I need water.”

A moment later, a misshapen mechanical droid with an oblong shaped body, wheels for its feet and a small flat screen, showing a cartoon hedgehog with exaggerated features, for its head appeared beside him. Its pincher hands held out a glass of water to its master.

He could have purchased a regular house droid, he made enough, but he was rarely home long enough to warrant it. And one day when he was doing inventory at the warehouse, one of his men were harassing him because he rarely threw anything out. He could always find a use for something, you never knew what someone might need, and if there was a need there could be a profit.

When they showed him a box of old and broken parts and equipment, his foreman Jang dared him to find a use for any of it. Katze promptly set about designing and constructing a fully functional droid. It was ugly as shit, and couldn't do half of what a normal house droid could do, but it could fetch and carry and obey commands and really, what more was needed?

He'd kept Spot around the warehouse for several weeks, it was useful for bringing him coffee or a fresh data pad when he was busy at his desk, but his men were always messing with it, so he brought the damn thing home. He deliberately chose not to add a voice module and if anyone got hold of the droid it couldn't tell them anything. Not that he was paranoid but working in the Black Market he had to be very careful, even at home. Besides, when he was home, he liked it quiet.

On a whim one day, he decided Spot needed a face at least, as he'd just had a flat carrying tray for a head originally. He used an old comp screen and drew the hedgehog character in several emotional states, then uploaded it to Spot's programming, so the little droid could display some sort of personality. Right now, the hedgehog's face had a large scowl, big rounded eyes and droopy ears.

"I'm okay," he assured the droid as he accepted the glass, dropped the powder into the water, swirled it around then drank it down. He handed the glass back to Spot. "Thanks, buddy." He smirked when the Hedgehog's face became happier.

Katze lay back again, sighed as he waited for the painkillers to kick in and closed his eyes. He quickly opened them again when the vision of Gideon Lagnat, bare-chested and standing behind Raoul Am, who had obviously just gotten out of bed, intruded.

He'd been worried when Raoul had asked him about his black outs. Actually, they seemed to have disappeared since his attack and that was just fine with him, but he was worried about Raoul's question because he wasn't sure if Gideon had overheard or understood the question. Raoul had assured him that no one would learn of his issues, and yet he'd blatantly asked such a question while another Blondie was present.

He told himself that his worry of such a betrayal was why he'd reacted the way he did and that he didn't care what Raoul and Gideon had been doing. The business, or personal affairs of two Blondies was not his concern, and the tightness in his gut just before he ended the call had been because of Raoul's question in the presence of another and nothing else. There had never been any rumors of Blondies having physical relationships with each other, but apparently, they did because it was obvious what they had been doing.

It really wasn't any of his business, and yet he couldn't get rid of this twisting feeling in his stomach. He was probably just hungry, he hadn't eaten all day, or possibly even yesterday so that could be the issue. That and the pain from his foot. Yeah, that had to be it. It had nothing to do with the idea of Raoul and Gideon in bed together.

He turned on his side and tried to close his eyes again, but once more the vision was there. He sat up. "Fucking Blondie!" he growled and winced when he felt a pressure below his waist. Great, now he had to go to the fucking bathroom, which meant he had to get up on his godforsaken foot again! Leaning down off the sofa he swore when he realized he'd tossed his crutches too far to reach, and they would be too big for Spot to pick up.

"Fuck! Fuckfuckfuckfuck!" he growled as he slowly rose and made his way across the room. Each hop jarred his foot painfully and several times he had to stop and grab a wall or piece of furniture to steady himself and take a breath to keep from passing out.

Finally, he made it into the bathroom, braced one foot and with one hand against the wall he freed himself and waited. "Come on. Come on, already!"

He stood, sweating and in pain, it was damn hard finding your balance while trying to piss, but his penis remained dry as a bone, despite being hard as a rock. It was stress, he decided. He was too wound up even to urinate. He slowly started to massage his cock, trying to urge it to release so he could go lay back down.

This was all Raoul's fault. Him and that other fucking Blondie. Why did he have to answer the comm half-dressed and looking like sex? He probably smelled of sex too, damn bastard. Iason and Riki were almost killed and he's off getting his jollies with his own brother. How sick was that? How fucking sick was...

Katze pressed his lips together as a moan escaped, unaware that the more he thought of Raoul the faster his hand was moving on his hardened cock.

Raoul was so superior, so fucking arrogant, so superior and so, so fucking beautiful. His hair had been messed up like someone had run their fingers through it repeatedly, but it had only enhanced the Blondie's appeal. Messy hair, pale, perfect naked skin. Bet they had a real fun time, all that touching, and kissing and thrusting. Had Gideon fucked Raoul or had it been the other way around? He bet it was the other way, and yet the vision of Gideon slamming repeatedly into Raoul suddenly blinded him with its intensity.

"Yes!" he cried and finally, finally felt the much-needed release in his cock, but when he managed to open his eyes and look down, he saw it wasn't urine that had come out. "Fuck," he whispered as he slid down, boneless after his first ever, fully realized orgasm.

What was happening to him? Had he really just masturbated to thoughts of Raoul fucking Am?

"I'm so screwed," he muttered and curled up on the cool tile of his bathroom, still shuddering.

Riki inhaled the sweet ocean air and tossed a stick for the dog that Cal had named Oscar. He'd searched the entire area for hours and couldn't find a

way past the field. Cal seemed to have forgiven him and made his favorite chicken dish for dinner, with help from Yielas the kid still only had one good arm. It was stupid not to let the woman heal him, but Riki wasn't going to push Cal on it, he'd pushed enough already.

He was still stupendously pissed at Iason, and yes, still pretty mad at Cal too, but that he'd get over. It was killing him not knowing what was happening with Iason and where the Blondie was. Someone had driven a vehicle through their condo, almost killing them both, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out who it could be.

Yes, Iason had enemies, and so did he really, but it didn't feel like an old or vengeful vendetta. He wondered if the attack on Katze was linked to what had happened at the condo, and if that might also have something to do with the weird eye thing Iason had suffered from. There was too much strange going on, too many hidden factors.

It could be tied to Avalon, but he didn't get that feeling in his gut. While he didn't completely trust Yielas, he knew she wouldn't actually hurt him. But, he supposed, she could be trying to hurt Iason so that Riki would have no reason to stay. Yeah, that could be it, but again it didn't feel right.

Not that it mattered what he thought, he decided angrily, because Iason didn't think he had brain enough or courage enough to help with anything. No, of course not. He was still just a fucking pet to the Blondie, that was all it was. What could a mongrel possibly know about vendettas and danger?

"I know plenty, motherfucker," he muttered as Oscar started barking like crazy.

Riki realized that the little dog hadn't retrieved the stick and had disappeared from his sight. He looked around and spotted a selection of rocks leading out towards the breakwater. He jogged over as Oscar continued to bark.

"Hey, shut up. What's wrong with you?"

Oscar growled and then whined as he continued to stare at a space behind one of the larger rocks. Riki moved closer and spotted a large four-legged creature curled between a space in the rocks, snarling dangerously.

“Are you stuck?” Riki asked and started to crouch, but the snarling animal snapped wide, razor sharp jaws at him and he backed up. “I’m just trying to help, idiot.”

The animal had dark brown and black badly matted fur covering its body, and from what Riki could see, it had two front legs and four back ones, but both seemed to be trapped in the space between the rocks. It was thin, Riki realized, it’s ribs showed even through it’s broad back and its eyes didn’t look quite right.

“Oscar, go get Cal.”

Oscar panted happily and plopped down on the sand.

“No, go get Cal.”

Oscar barked and pawed at the sand.

“You’re useless.” Riki glanced around to see if there was a large stick or something he could use to help get the animal out of the spot it’s in, or a way to move the rocks themselves. They were pretty big, probably too big to move on his own. Maybe Yielia could do some mojo and help move them. “Okay, I’ll be back,” he told the growling beast and jogged back towards the house, forgetting about his anger with Iason for the moment.

“Yielia!” he called as he entered the beach house and she appeared almost immediately.

“Yes, Riki?”

“Can you move things with your...” He waved his hands.

“Sometimes.”

“She can,” Cal said. “If not for her we would never have reached you and Master Iason beneath the rubble of the collapse at the condo site.”

“What did you do?” Riki asked and again it was Cal who replied.

“She pulled the rubble off you, held it back until they could get you out of there.”

“Great. Perfect.” Riki grabbed Yielas hand. “Come with me.”

He pulled her along as they ran back to rock area, Oscar running and barking behind them and Cal taking up the rear.

“There,” he said and pointed to the creature. “He’s stuck and the rocks are too big to move myself. Can you...?”

“Oh, the poor beast.” Yielas walked carefully around the area, judging whether it would cause damage if she moved any of the rocks. When she got too close it snapped at her as it had with Riki. “I do not believe moving the rocks will work, as the others may roll in and crush it or cause further injury.”

“You can’t hold them back like what Cal said?”

“I cannot be sure which ones might move, Riki.” She shook her head. “Are you sure it is trapped? It looks like it has room to move.”

“Has to be.” He pointed to where one of the four back legs seemed wedged. “I can’t see all of its back leg, there, see?” She nodded.

“Yes, possibly it is pinned then.” She glanced towards the sea which was slowly moving towards them in gentle, yet insistent waves.

“The tide is coming in,” Cal announced quietly. “It will drown if it stays there. Perhaps if we reach in and tried to pull the leg free?” He stepped closer to beast and could see several injuries on its front feet and around its snout. Reaching his hand forward, he quickly snatched it back to avoid losing his fingers as the sharp jaws snapped at him. “Or not.”

“It won’t let us help it.” Yielo murmured, sadly. “It is filled with fear.”

“Well, afraid or not, it’s gonna die if it stays here.” Riki decided firmly as the water crept closer. He pulled his belt off and made a loop with it then hopped up on the closest rock. “Yielo, can you see which rock its leg is pinned under?”

She nodded. “I believe it is this one.” She pointed and Riki nodded as he straddled the rocks over the creature trapped below.

“When I get this around its neck, try and shift that rock just a bit so I can try and pull it free.”

“Be careful, Riki. It will most definitely try to bite you.”

“Yeah.” Riki tried to lower the looped belt but the beast kept snapping at it. “Damn, I need him to look down.”

Cal glanced at the stasis field around his arm and stepped closer. “Try this.” He shoved his arm toward the beast and sure enough the animal latched on almost immediately. The field prevented its teeth from piercing Cal’s arm and Riki managed to get the belt looped around the beast’s head while it was distracted.

“Now, Yielo.”

Yielo lifted her hand and it started to glow green. The rock to Riki’s left shifted and he yanked hard. The creature yelped and released Cal’s arm, causing the young man to fall back onto the sand as Riki pulled the animal out of the crevasse. The beast started thrashing immediately as it found freedom and the belt slipped from Riki’s hand, giving the animal the chance to charge Cal.

“Cal!” Riki cried and was shocked when Oscar suddenly put himself between the wounded creature and the prostate furniture.

Oscar growled dangerously and started barking like mad, his little body quivering with the effort. It was enough for the creature to back off and

limp further down the beach.

Riki jumped down and helped Cal to his feet. “You okay?”

“I...I think so.” Cal crouched and stroked Oscar who was so happy with his new found courage that he nearly wagged himself into a hole. “Go...good dog. Good boy, Oscar.”

“It’s starving,” Yielo said quietly as they watched the creature lope slowly up the beach and away from the tide. “Look how thin it is.”

“We can feed it once we catch it,” Riki decided as they started after the beast, however despite their best efforts, the animal continued to run away from them or snarl and try to bite them. It even refused to let them near when Cal retrieved some meat from the house and tried to entice it.

Cal slowly settled on patio steps of the house as the wounded animal curled in the shade of tree several feet away and watched them warily. “Do you know, I think it’s a Dongo.”

“What’s a Dongo?” Riki asked as he settled beside the Furniture.

“They’re mining dogs, for spice mines. You see how it’s claws are spliced into three sections, it’s very good for digging and funnelling the larger pieces of spice. It’s strange to find it here, they almost never are let outside.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it before,” Riki admitted. “I wonder how it got here and where it came from?”

Cal brushed the sand off of his slacks and, because the dog wouldn’t stop jumping, he let Oscar climb onto his lap. “Perhaps the miners sold it to someone and they were trying to get rid of it. It has a lot of injuries, could be the result of being thrown from a moving vehicle, or possibly from abuse of it’s owner or some other person.”

“Miners?”

“Unlikely. Dongos are usually very docile and loyal creatures. They like to dig, which is why the miners use them, and are very easy to train. They also possess very keen night vision so a Miner would not normally abuse it because they need the animals to work. They may have simply had too many in a litter to use and sold one of them to an outsider.”

“Why do you think it wasn’t just a fight with another animal?”

“Its injuries don’t appear to be bites or scratches which would be consistent with another animal attack.”

“It’s just an dumb animal. Why beat an animal?”

“I can’t answer that. Some people are just very cruel.”

“Then why won’t it let us help?” Riki usually didn’t care about such things, animals and people died every day in Ceres, but it tore a little at his heart to watch the frightened Dongo, with a belt still around it’s neck, shivering in pain and fear as it cowered several feet away. “It’s obviously hungry and in pain. You’d think it would be grateful that someone wanted to care for it.”

“When someone hurts you, it is difficult to trust others not to.” Cal set Oscar down and put his hand on Riki’s shoulder. “Sometimes fear and pride is all that prevents a creature from accepting the love and care of another, even when they know is for their own good.”

Riki turned and met the young man’s intense gaze. “Is that a crack?”

“A crack?” Cal rose to his feet. “About what?”

“I don’t know,” Riki admitted cautiously, and it was true, but he didn’t like the heavy sensation Cal’s words had caused inside of him, so it had to be some kind of an insult right? “But it sounds like a crack.”

“Well, the good thing about cracks is they can be filled.” Cal smirked. “Like, for instance, with cake?”

Riki watched Cal and Yiel disappear into the beach house and was left alone as the young man’s words resonated painfully through the confused

mongrel.

Chapter 28

Summary for the Chapter:

Gideon stops his brothers from doing something wrong and Shiao decides it's time to act.

Gideon stalked down the hallway of the Silver tower to his offices. Iason's deadline had come and gone, and their assets had been released. It was probably the first time in history that Jupiter's favored son had bluffed. However, instead of being content that the issue had been resolved, the Blondies had pounced on what they now perceived as a weakness in the great Iason Mink. It irritated him enough to be alarmed at the changes that were overtaking everyone.

No one ever would, ever could understand that while Iason was the youngest of them, he was also the greatest of Jupiter's accomplishments, the greatest Elite ever created. Initially he too had worried over the mongrel's influence on his dear brother, worried that Iason was becoming too attached and that Riki would somehow be used against Iason. His fears had been realized all too quickly by the fact that his brothers blamed the mongrel for every slight Iason paid to them, every change in his behavior.

Perhaps it had been the mongrel that had caused Iason to change, but Gideon could not agree that it was a bad change. Iason had always been different from the rest of them, set apart not just by Jupiter's preference but by his very perfection. Iason had unbelievable control over himself and his emotions, or at least he used to. It made him appear formidable, cunning and intimidating to the other Blondies. Iason may have sensed his brother's envy and discomfort and may have been the cause that made him so detached and cold to everyone.

Raoul was probably the only one of the Blondies that had grown closer to Iason over the years, but Gideon had also developed a great fondness for Iason. He enjoyed this new, and he considered improved, version of his

brother because Iason was not taking everything so damn seriously. He revealed passion and conviction that Gideon had not believed possible and most importantly, most enviably, of all the Elites, only Iason had learned that one emotion that seemed forever out of their reach; he had learned the Human concept of love. And yet, still, none of them had been a proper brother to him.

Except perhaps for Issac. Iason must have sensed Issac's gentleness and acceptance and that was why he allowed his frosty mask to slip on occasion around the Blondie. Perhaps Iason would be a different Blondie all together if they had all followed Issac's example and had tried to understand Iason and accept his differences, rather than condemning their brother for them.

He could not imagine how difficult it must have been for Iason to have made the decision to punish Issac the way he had, Gideon had been furious and he didn't agree with the punishment, but he could say nothing as it had been Iason's decision to make. Issac had been the bane of his existence for over a century, and yet Gideon considered him his baby brother, even though Issac was created before him. No one could truly be angry with Issac, as the Blondie had simply been too good natured and fun. But after his punishment he was none of those things. Issac ceased to exist and what was left had been little more than a shell. Gideon was fond of Iason, but he would never fully forgive him for that.

He sighed and wondered how had things gotten to this point? How had they spun so horrifically out of control? The Blondies seemed to have forgotten all about their duties in favour of plotting together or causing disruptions, and he was no better than his brothers. The tryst with Raoul had been a surprising and welcome distraction, but he was already regretting it. He couldn't claim to know what had come over him that he would cross that line, he only knew that once it was before him, he could do nothing but step over.

Of all the Blondies, it was Raoul he found the most stimulating, the most like a brother to him. Raoul, with his critical, scientific mind, and keen, often sarcastic wit was the only one who could truly understand Gideon's need for fun and frivolity. Raoul never condemned him for speaking his mind and they'd had some wonderful verbal sparring sessions over the

years. He knew that if he needed a real favour or was ever in trouble Raoul would be there for him.

It annoyed him that Raoul's confidence and trust was more for Iason, but he couldn't change that, and as it did not interfere in their relationship he believed there was no need to. Regardless, he did not want Raoul to come to harm, so he would not allow his own petty jealousies to cause such harm.

The other Blondies were horrifically selfish and close minded, but he was also guilty of such feelings. Was it not his one brief act of anger and remorse that had set all of this in motion? How quickly things had spiraled out of control and how humiliatingly limited he'd found himself to be in such circumstances.

He stepped into his office, closed and secured the door them moved to his terminal. His attempts at sabotage obviously weren't enough to turn back the tide of the wave that was due to hit them, so he would have to try the direct approach.

Keying in a selection of codes that would scramble the transmission, he quickly typed his message and sent it. Now, he could only hope that the receiver would respond as requested and he could end this nonsense once and for all. He sat back and stared at the screen as a blue line trailed through then repeated, waiting for a response on the other end.

"Answer it damn it," he growled, impatiently, but when the blue line continued to glow, he pushed back from his desk, frustrated and moved to his interior windows that overlooked the muti-level lobby areas.

Focused on two Elites chatting animatedly by the large fountain, he almost missed the two Blondies on the second lobby level as they disappeared into a room with what looked like a Human woman. A moment later, a young Furniture stepped out and closed the door.

He scowled as he tried to remember what room it was, and he realized it was monitoring center for the complex; Furniture was not permitted to leave their station. He started for the door. A bad feeling overtook him as he

descended the spiral staircase four steps at a time, and hurried across the second level.

When he reached the room he found the door locked. He knocked but there was no answer. He could hear movement inside, so he simply punched the door and it flew off its hinges.

Laren Po and Leon Clare glanced up from where they crouched on the floor, the woman he had seen earlier lay on the floor between the two Blondies, her clothes had been torn from her body.

“What are you doing?” Gideon demanded as he strode in.

“None of your concern,” Po insisted as he held the woman down when she started to struggle again. His hand covered her mouth but her eyes were wide with fear and tears streaked down her pale cheeks. “We have business with this woman, now leave us.”

Gideon should have walked away, it was not the Blondie way to interfere in the actions or pursuits of another Blondie, and yet the horror on the woman’s face could not be denied. Blondies had the right to take what they wanted, but not in such a distasteful and disrespectful way. Did they actually plan to take this woman physically?

“What are you waiting for?” Leon demanded as he pulled the struggling woman’s naked legs further apart. “You were told to leave.”

“You cannot do this.” Gideon knew he was going to regret it the minute he said it. “Let her go.”

Leon rose menacingly. “You dare to give us orders?”

“You cannot take this unwilling woman for your own! She is not a registered pet but a designated worker and it is against ...” Gideon had expected the blow, but not the force behind it. An irritated slap was one thing, but Leon had put force into the assault and Gideon stumbled backwards.

“I do not wish to fight you brother, please just let the woman go.”

“You will be the one to leave. It will be your choice if it is through the door or through the window.”

Gideon glanced out the window, easily a five story drop. He would probably survive it, but he did not want to test the theory. “Leon, Po. You are not yourselves. This is not the Blondie way...” He dodged the fist that swung his way and caught his brother in a headlock. “Stop this! I do not wish to fight you. We are Blondies and we must...” He flew backwards as Po Laren grabbed him and threw him against the wall. Gideon looked up at both of his brothers, stunned, as they advanced towards him. He lifted his hands in defense. “Do not do this...”

“The window it is then,” Leon decided, not noticing that the woman had scrambled up and fled through the broken doorway. He bent to grab Gideon by the tunic, lifted, then started shaking as if an electric current had hit him.

Gideon found himself back on the floor, with his brother’s body laid prone beside him. Po spun around and faced the Blondie in the doorway and in Raoul’s hand a small hand phaser that disbursed up to 5000 volts of electricity.

“Walk away,” Raoul warned as he stepped out of the doorway and leveled the weapon at his brother. “I will fire again, without compunction or remorse”

“You dare use such a device on a Blondie?” Po snarled.

“Yes, and I will again, without guilt or remorse.” When Po stepped towards him Raoul deliberately increased the setting on the phaser. “No remorse at all, Po.”

Po Lauren glanced down at his fallen brother, then stalked out of the room.

Raoul lowered the weapon and stepped over the unconscious Blondie to offer Gideon a hand up. “What the hell is going on?”

“Doomsday,” Gideon muttered as they stepped out of the room and glanced back at Leon. “What should we do about him?”

“Leave him.” Raoul propped the broken door back in the entrance way to shield the scene from onlookers. “He’ll wake up in a few minutes. Are you going to tell me what happened?”

Gideon gave a brief summary as they took the stairs back up to the higher levels.

“Unbelievable. This entire place is going to hell.” Raoul followed Gideon into his offices and closed the door.

Gideon rounded his desk, glanced at his monitor and was relieved to see the blue line had been replaced by an incoming transmission. He pressed a key to acknowledge it, then locked the screen and lifted his gaze to find Raoul aiming the phaser at him. “Brother?”

“You are going to tell me what is going on, Gideon.”

“I just told you, Raoul. I saw them take the woman and...”

“Iason knows. He knows you’re the one who programmed the vehicle.” Raoul watched Gideon blink and then a blank mask slipped over his brother’s face. “I’m giving you the chance to explain before I take him.”

Gideon dropped into his chair. “It was never supposed to hit the condo, Raoul. It was just supposed to scare them into leaving.”

Raoul’s grip tightened on his weapon as he battled back disappointment. “So it was you. You tried to kill Iason!”

“No!” Gideon rose again. “I tried to stop it! I’ve been trying to stop it since it began. I would never want Iason hurt, and I truly did not believe this would cause such damage. It was just supposed to fly by, just a skim of the condo. It was a tactic and if I thought for one minute that it would fly into it I would have worked harder to stop it.”

“What is it you’re trying to stop? If you’re not behind the attacks then who is?”

Gideon could only stare at Raoul, his loyalties divided. Things were getting out of hand, too far out of hand. “He...Raoul, he’s not in his right mind. You have to understand...”

“The only thing I understand is that Iason has been under attack for several months and you knew about it and said nothing!”

“I couldn’t! It was never supposed to go this far. I thought he just wanted revenge, he had the right to a modicum of revenge but I never expected...” Gideon rounded the desk and was alarmed when Raoul adjusted the weapon’s aim to his head; if he fired it would be a fatal shot. “How did Iason know I was involved?”

“It doesn’t matter how, he knows and now I know. I am very disappointed in you, Gideon. Was having intercourse with me another tactic? Were you hoping I would give you information on Iason? Maybe tell you where he was staying so you could try again?”

“I never tried to kill him! I was just as horrified as you when his condo collapsed and as for what happened between us, that was...Quite frankly I don’t know what it was or why we went that far, but Raoul I would never do anything to betray you or Iason.” He leaned against his desk. “I’ve been so careful. How could he possibly suspect me?”

“You were the only one that wasn’t outraged by having his assets frozen.”

Gideon stared at Raoul and then slowly nodded. Iason was more cunning than he could ever imagine. “I knew it would make no difference.”

“Because you had accounts set up elsewhere?”

“Because I did not do this!”

“Don’t lie to me! Damn it I trusted you! You were not only my brother but also my friend! How could you do this to Iason?”

Gideon spread his hands helplessly. “I miscalculated. We do not all have Iason’s superior skill of assessment. I made a mistake.” He straightened and took another step towards Raoul. “I can make this right. I can fix it, but you must give me time.”

“You must be joking.”

“I can! Take me to Iason if you must, but give me an hour or two at the most.”

“Take you to Iason? He’s well beyond your reach now, Gideon.”

Gideon’s expression darkened. “Where is he, Raoul? Where is Iason now?”

“As if I would tell you.”

“You must, it’s the only way we can save him!”

“Save him? You tried to kill him!”

“No! I’ve been doing everything to keep him alive. Please, you must trust me.”

Raoul stared at Gideon, wanted to believe, wanting to trust but he couldn’t take the chance. He couldn’t deny that he had felt something more for Gideon after their liaison, a closeness that could not be easily earned or replicated, but he would not risk Iason’s life. He’d also asked Iason to give him time, to trust him to confirm their suspicions and now that he had, he knew that he wasn’t going to let Gideon anywhere near his dear brother.

“I’m sorry,” he said, because despite what he had told Po, he knew that this time he would feel regret.

“Raoul, don...” Gideon felt the burn of electricity surge through his body, managed a moment of stunned relief that Raoul had adjusted the aim for his chest instead of his head, then his world turned dark.

Guy stepped into the specialized hut that they had been given inside the village area and scowled as he watched Shiao finish packing a small suitcase. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I must leave for a while, Guy.” Shaio fastened the case, picked it up and moved to place his hand on Guy’s shoulder. “You will stay here, where it is safe.”

Guy dodged the kiss that Shiao had aimed for his lips. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

“You will not kiss me goodbye?”

“No, because we’re not saying goodbye.”

“We’re not?”

Guy grabbed the case from Shiao and set it on the floor. “You could at least give me time to pack, too.”

“Guy, no. You will stay here...”

“No, Shiao, I will not. Where you go, I go, remember? We’re friends, partners, a team.”

“We are also lovers,” Shiao said with a small, almost shy smile and was thrilled when Guy turned back and returned it.

“Yeah, that too. And because we are, we do things together.”

“I can’t take you with me, Guy.”

“Why?”

“It could be dangerous.”

“I live for danger. Didn’t I kill a giant fucking rat?”

“You were very brave, but this is different and...”

Guy walked across the room, grabbed a handful of clothes out of the makeshift closet and tossed them in a satchel. “Wherever it is, I’m going, Shiao.” He tossed in a data pad, a few snacks from their old home and closed the bag. “You can try to leave without me, but I’ll just follow you, and we both know how much trouble I can get into when I’m on my own, so...” He slung the bag over his shoulder, turned back to the perplexed Onyx. “Take me with you, or accept that if I get eaten by a giant rat, it’s your fault for not keeping a better eye on me.”

Shiao stared silently for several long minutes, but Guy forced himself to keep his posture relaxed, despite the nerves and discomfort the former elite’s gaze was causing him.

“I am going to see Iason.”

Guy cringed inwardly. “Why? Did he call for you?”

“No, but he will be looking for me.” Shiao crossed the room to take Guy by the shoulders again. “A situation is occurring that will change everything. Iason must come to me, as I knew he would, for I am the only one who can answer his questions.”

“What questions? And how do you know?”

“I just know. I do not want to put you in this middle of this, Guy. Please, for me, will you stay?”

Something in his eyes, in his voice made Guy’s heart drop into his stomach.
“You’re not coming back.”

“I do not know what the outcome will be. Iason needs me and...”

“Fuck Iason! I need you!”

Shiao smiled. “I cannot do the first but I am very pleased by the second.” He slid his arms around Guy, held him. “You are important to me, Guy. I cannot bear for you to come to harm.” He pulled back. “Iason is also

important to me and I cannot allow him to face this alone. He has no idea what is coming.”

“I don’t care if you need to go see him, or if you need to help or whatever, Shiao, but you can’t leave me behind.”

“Why can’t I?”

Guy stared at him and felt his cheeks heat. “Because I...” He punched Shiao in the chest, frustrated that the Onyx did not even register the attack. “Because I love you, you *asshole!* And if you leave me here alone so you can go off and play hero and maybe die I will be pissed at you forever!”

Shiao slowly smiled and pulled Guy against him. “And if I love you, should I not do whatever I can to keep you safe?”

Guy’s heartbeat skipped and then started to thud hard and fast against his ribcage, but he kept his face buried against Shiao’s chest. “Do...do you love me?”

“I think I must.” Shiao’s large hand smoothed down over Guy’s hair, and then his back. “I think that is all this can be, this sensation of worry and contentment that consumes me whenever I think of you, see you, touch you.” He caught Guy’s chin, lifted so their lips met, once, twice. “I could tie you up and leave you here.”

Guy slid his arms around Shiao’s neck. “You won’t. You need me.” He pressed his lips to Shiao’s in the same pattern. “I need you. It’s stupid to be apart. Please don’t leave me behind.”

When their lips met again, the kiss was long, deep and oh so tender. When they parted, their gazes held for several long moments.

“As if I could,” Shiao murmured, as he slipped Guy’s bag off the mongrel’s shoulder, slid it over his own then stepped back and picked up his case. “Come on then.”

Shu'grth moved forward as they stepped out of the hut. "I wish you safe journey and have a request."

"You have only to ask, we are forever in your debt."

The chief nodded and indicated the cloaked figure beside him. "This is Ran'talgis I request that you take him to the place where there is the other of us."

"I don't know if she is just like you," Guy reminded, "Or if she'll be on Amoï, but it won't hurt to look."

Shu'grth nodded. "We are grateful and hope to welcome you both home

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello Friends, I am having a bit of a dilemma on one of my chapters and was wondering if you might lend me your assistance? Riki comes to a very important conclusion. I am wondering which you would prefer, that he come to this conclusion through long thoughtful introspection, or with a little 'Avalon inspired' help. I know not everyone is thrilled with the magic concept. Please let me know, also comment on this chapter if you enjoyed it and thank you everyone for all the fantastic and inspiring reviews. :-)

Chapter 29

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki finally realizes something about himself and is rewarded.

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Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so so much for your thoughts on this chapter. It really helped me reorganize the structure of it. I hope you enjoy what I have managed to put together. Cheers! Ani

Riki stepped outside after picking at the delicious breakfast that Cal had prepared. He hadn't slept well and when he did sleep he was tormented by nightmares, though he couldn't at the moment remember what they were about.

Yesterday evening, he, Cal and Yielia had all tried getting close to the Dongo, but it remained viciously untrusting. In the end, Cal had left some food and water close by in case it got hungry. Now Riki was going to check on the stupid thing, because it had gotten under his skin.

He stepped off the patio steps to the beach and glanced towards the trees where the Dongo had taken refuge, but it was gone. Walking over to the bowls that Cal had left out, he noticed that neither had been touched.

Had it gotten better and wandered away? There shouldn't have been any wildlife to bother it because of the fence field that Cal had erected around the area. If Riki couldn't get out, chances were very slim any other creatures could get inside, with the exception of a birds and insects that managed to skim over the top of the field. Which meant the Dongo had to have been inside the area before they got there.

Starting a light jog down the beach, he wondered if the animal had gotten stuck somewhere again but he had only gone a few yards when he saw it.

“Shit. Shit!”

Riki stared at the dead Dongo curled on the sand with a mixture of anger and remorse. Why hadn’t it eaten the food that had been left? Why had it refused to be helped? It made no sense. Didn’t all animals have the instinct for survival? Mongrels were often compared to them because they shared that same instinct, yet this poor, pathetic beast chose to starve to death and succumb to its injuries rather than trust someone to help it.

Sometimes fear and pride prevents a creature from accepting help from another, even if it is for their own good.

Is that what Cal had been meant? Was that how people saw at him, how Iason thought of him, as a wild animal that didn’t understand what was good for him? It was obvious that when they had first met, Iason had not considered him very much more than that, but then why bother taking him as a pet? Riki fought all the time against everything. He had refused to give into anything Iason did, refused everything that Iason had offered until he’d had to barter for the lives of his friends by accepting his fate. And still he had fought, not as hard or as often, but he had certainly made it clear he hated being a pet.

He looked back at what his life had been like in Ceres, and all he could remember was fear and misery. In the slums, he’d had to fight and scrounge for everything, food, shelter, respect; nothing was free. Power, strength and position was tenuous at best, because there was always someone else who was also fighting to survive, and who understood that the only way to do that was through reputation and fear. You could be top of the food chain one day and the bottom of it the next. Nothing was certain, life was precarious and there were never any guarantees.

He had never cried. Not even as a child, when he was being beaten and starved had he shed a single tear. Nor had he ever begged, not for food or warmth, not for others to stop hurting him, not even for his life. Asking for sympathy, or even showing it only earned you a beating, or a rape, or both.

Pity was for the weak. Compassion was for the stupid. If you had either in Ceres, you paid the price.

In Eos he had been a pet, to be brought out and played with whenever Iason felt the urge. There was always a warm bed, good clothes and plenty of food. Instead of stealing or bartering for goods, any of the shops would let him walk out with whatever he wanted, because everyone knew which Blondie he belonged to.

For Riki, accepting that role as pet, the benefits, the luxuries meant giving up his mongrel pride. To give up his pride was to deny his identity and despite what Yielia and the people of Avalon claimed, he was a mongrel. He had never been ashamed of it, never apologized for it or denied it, until he was forced to live as a pet. Then, and only then had he known shame or desperation.

Despite the hard life in Ceres, he had never cried, not even as a child when he was being beaten and starved had he shed a single tear. Nor had he ever begged, not for food or warmth, not for others to stop hurting him, not even for his life. Yet, in the time that he had been with Iason he'd shed tears, he'd begged, and more times than he could count he'd swallowed his pride and succumbed to the often humiliating treatment of a pet.

No one understood how each of those instances had worn on him, had carved another piece out of his hard-worn pride and caused the seeds of bitterness and resentment and anger to grow far quicker than anything that had happened to him in Ceres. Iason didn't seem to understand that and Riki didn't have the verbal skills to make the Blondie understand, whenever he tried that'd end up in another fight.

What would his life be like now if he was still there? Where and who would he be if he had never offered his body to a Blondie and been taken as a pet? Would he still be etching out a meager living working for Katze? Doubtful as despite his eagerness to get the position, he'd found the tasks mundane and useless; it held no interest for him once he had started.

Life in Ceres had been on his terms, but he still had to trade on his body most days to get what he needed. And despite the respect Bison had acquired there were always other gangs trying to make their mark. There was no guarantee that he'd live through the night or make it home without some sort of injury. His pride refused to acknowledge that would happen, but his realistic side knew that it was only a matter of time before he and Bison were brought down and forgotten.

Living with Iason had been better in some ways, yet far worse in others. There probably was no really good life for someone like him, he would always have to take the good with the bad, right? And he had taken it, he'd accepted his role as a pet, accepted the hateful stares and remarks of others and accepted that Iason was never going to let him go. So why had Cal said that? He felt that somehow the kid had been comparing him to the Dongo, but he couldn't figure out why. He'd accepted his situation as a pet, accepted food and help, whereas the Dongo had refused.

"Oh dear."

Riki turned and saw Cal beside him, holding a fresh bowl of meat, no doubt intended for the now dead animal.

"It must have died in the night."

"Yeah," Riki returned quietly, his gaze lingering on the food that Cal had brought for the animal.

Cal had been trained as Furniture but it was just in Cal's nature to take care of people and pets, and to want others to be happy and satisfied. He thought of all the care that Cal had given him over the years, even when he initially fought against it and wondered if Iason would ever have considered him as something more than a pet if he'd continued to bark and fight and rebel against everyone and everything?

Riki wasn't caring or nurturing. He was anything but those things, so why did Cal and Yielia and everyone else put up with him? Why did Iason love him? Why had Guy? He just didn't understand it. All the anger inside of him, all the doubt and mistrust. Why would anyone care about him? But

they did. He knew they did and yet he couldn't reciprocate those emotions, not really. One thing, it always just took one thing to shake his trust and then he was the spitting mad mongrel once again.

Cal lifted his head and met Riki's intense gaze and misread the mongrel's scowling expression. "It isn't your fault, Riki." He watched the mongrel flinch, he wondered if Riki was aware of it. "There was probably nothing we could do to help it, anyway."

"It didn't want to live," Riki shrugged and looked back at the dead animal. He couldn't understand why anything would choose to die. They could have helped it, Yielia probably could have healed it. It makes no sense to a mongrel who had fought for his very existence all his life.

"No."

It was just a dead animal, Riki decided. Its death shouldn't be bothering him so much. Shit like this just happened and you couldn't get attached, couldn't let it bother you or it would eat you up inside. Caring about anything was the road to self destruction, he firmly believed that and...Was that why he couldn't let himself love Iason the way he should? Was that kind of thinking why he couldn't be happy as Iason wanted him to be?

He'd told Guy that he loved Iason, but that was to convince Guy to give up on him. He may have even said it to Iason once or twice, but he didn't really understand what love was. It was need, he figured. An uncontrollable need to be with someone, which was exactly how he how Iason felt about him. Iason was obsessed with Riki and on some level, Riki was also obsessed with Iason, but that was the only kind of love Iason had for him. It was simply something he had to accept, this love of a Blondie.

Never, in the time he'd been with Guy, did he consider his feelings for his old pairing partner to be love. Friendship, the need to protect, attraction, but love? No, he hadn't loved, couldn't love Guy. He'd worried about Guy, had begged Iason to spare his life, but he'd never missed Guy when they weren't together. He never thought anything of fucking other men or getting out of Ceres altogether and leaving Guy behind. Sex with anyone but Iason wasn't even a consideration and leaving Iason behind would be impossible.

So that meant what he felt for Iason was love, but then why didn't it make him happy? Why was he still so resentful? Was he really like a desperate, snarling, starving animal, because he couldn't fully accept Iason's feelings, that he was on the path to self-destruction? Would Iason get tired of his moods and resentment and leave him by the side of the road to die?

"Riki?" Cal stepped forward when Riki paled. "Are you going to be ill?"

"No!" Riki shook Cal off. Sweet Jupiter, get hold of yourself, he thought frantically as his heart beat nearly tripled inside his chest. "It's just a dead animal. Who cares if it's dead? It didn't want to be helped, so who fucking cares? It made the choice. It made..."

Just like you.

Riki turned away suddenly when his inner voice sounded and he started walking down the beach, ignoring Cal's call to him. What the hell? What was wrong with him? His chest hurt, really hurt and his head, the space between his eyes throbbed. Fuck, no way was he going to cry over a dead fucking Dongo. No fucking way! *He* was not an animal. He was not like that at all.

You trust no one. You care for no one. You love no one. You too will die alone and suffering.

"That's not true!" He trusted Iason, and Katze and Cal. He cared for them.

Then why do you fight? Why do you refuse to believe? Why do you mistrust?

He dropped to his knees on the sand and inhaled the sweet ocean air then started pulling handfuls of sand towards him, trying to shake the voice away. He didn't fight as much as he used to, and it was just really hard to believe that Iason actually loved him. He couldn't help it. He couldn't see how anyone could actually love him. That wasn't his fault! He was a mongrel, damn it! Nobody gave a shit about mongrels and mongrels didn't give a shit about anyone else.

Why aren't you happy?

“I don’t fucking know!” he cried as his hands shoved through the sand. “It’s not my fault! I want to be but I can’t!”

Something familiar started to grow inside him, and soon a small castle started to form beneath his hands. His hands seemed to have a mind of their own as they continued to create walls and turrets and shapes out of sand. The mounds began to form a familiar shape.

Slowly, a memory of another sandy beach eased into his mind like a summer breeze trickling through a half open window. Unlike previous recollections, this memory brought no pain, no pressure, not even fear. This memory was quiet, reflective and left Riki with a calm, open feeling.

The Queen, in a dark green one-piece swimsuit, stretched out on a long cloth covered chair. The King curled in the sand beside a little boy as they built towers out of sand. Riki’s tiny hands could not scoop as much as his father’s, so he tried to be faster to finish his side first.

A strikingly beautiful young girl with russet skin, dressed in a short handkerchief skirt, hurried up to them. Her thin blouse curled up to expose a smooth, bare stomach. She dropped down beside them and released her shirt, allowing a selection of beautiful shells to fall upon the sand.

“Pretty!” Riki cried and grabbed one of the shells to plop it down on the top of his small mound of sand.

“We can make a beautiful tower with these Maku!” she gushed happily.

“Yielia!” The King scowled. “Why didn’t you bring any shells for my castle?”

“Yielia is mine!” Riki insisted as he caught the girl’s hand in both of his smaller ones and held it to his chest. “She is for me.”

The King laughed. “She is indeed for you. I found the prettiest girl in the kingdom for my precious boy, didn’t I?”

“Yes!” Riki crowed and handed a shell to Yielia, instructing her where to place it on his mounded tower. “She takes care of me, like Mama and Papa.”

“And who do you love best?” his mother demanded, amused when her son rose and toddled over to climb onto her lap.

“Love all thems.”

“All thems?” The Queen hugged him hard and laughed. “Who is all thems?”

“Mama and Papa and Yielia, and Rando and Missy and all thems peoples who loves us.”

“Do you mean the people in our castle?”

“More thems!”

The King chuckled. “Do you love all the people in the kingdom? Every last one?”

Riki nodded solemnly and played with his mother’s silver necklace. “More thems.”

“What more?”

“Them. ” Riki pointed out several large fish jumping through the waves, then spotted a crab crawling across the sand by the lounger. “Them. ” He lifted his head as a huge bird soared over head. “Them. ”

“So much love!” The Queen tickled her son. “Do you think you can really love all of them, my darling?”

“Yes. ” Riki’s answer was immediate and as his eyes rose to his mothers, his body started to glow. “All thems.”

Riki’s eyes opened with a shocking alertness, then slowly focused on a small, stunningly accurate palace before him, approximately two feet tall

and made entirely of sand. It was the palace of Avalon, and when he glanced down at his hands, the greenish glow was just starting to fade away.

Stunned beyond words he felt his chest fill and expand with a warmth he'd never felt before.

A bird cried out above him and as he looked up he felt an instant connection to the creature.

"Love all of them," he murmured as his chest swelled and his breathing grew sharp but not painful as a well of emotion opened up inside of him and burst into his heart.

Love all them. All people, all creatures.

The burning red sun that dipped towards the edge of the water as it started to set was eclipsed by the overwhelming joy, the incomparable serenity and pleasure that slid outwards from his chest, from his core, and into his limbs, his hands, his feet, his face and head.

Gasping at the foreign sensations that rocked him, Riki lifted his hands to his face and found it warm and wet with his own tears. Was this happiness? Was this love?

He scrambled to his feet and backed up several paces before he ran for the house.

"Yiela!"

Yiela hurried out of the beach house at her Prince's urgent call and hurried towards him. "What is it? What is wrong? Are you injured?"

He showed her his hands, which had now returned to normal. "I...I was doing it...something was happening..." He caught her arm and pulled her back to the sand castle. "Look. I did this without knowing I was doing it."

"You did this with your power?"

"I don't know! I...I was just sitting there," Brooding, he realized. Overthinking things and brooding and working himself into a frenzy of

anger and guilt, just as he always did. “I started to scoop the sand together, I don’t know why, but then I remembered something. A time when I was younger and we were at a beach. My...” Riki was still having difficulty with the idea of having parents. “The King and Queen were there and you, you were there. We were building sand castles and you brought shells and I was remembering it so vividly and then suddenly this castle in the sand was built and my hands....my hands glowed.”

“Oh Riki!” She caught his hands between both of hers. “I do recall that time. It is a wonderful memory.”

“That’s not all! That’s not even half of it.” He took a deep breath and felt the joy in his heart expand. “Love. I feel it. I can feel it, deep inside, deeper than deep and I *know* what it is!” He laughed out loud. There was no guilt, no pride or remorse, just pure love. “I *love* Iason. I can say it and really mean it. I love him and...” He touched her cheek. “I love you. Sweet mother of Jupiter I can love *you*, Yielia. It isn’t the same, nowhere near the same as what I feel for Iason but it’s there and I can feel it. I can *feel it!*”

Yielia’s eyes teared up with moisture even as she smiled. “Oh, my sweet Prince.”

“What’s happened? What’s wrong?” Cal demanded running up to them. “Riki are you...?” Cal was stunned silent as Riki grabbed him in a fierce hug and kissed him right on the lips. “Riki!”

“Cal.” Riki leaned his head against the younger man’s, and ignored the slight resentment that Cal was now half an inch taller than he. “You were right. You’re always right, because...” He pulled back, laughed and hugged Cal again. “Because you’re Cal!”

Cal stared over Riki’s shoulder at Yielia, confused. Had his charge been stung by some aquatic beast? Was he inebriated? “That’s...lovely. What am I right about?”

“It was me! It’s been me the whole time! I’m the fucking Dongo!”

“Riki?” Cal frowned when Riki finally released him. “What are you talking about?”

“It stunted you, somehow,” Yielia decided and they both turned to her. “Your emotions, Riki. The life that you lead somehow caused you to close off your natural emotions, they were underdeveloped, limited in a way.”

“Yeah, sure, okay.” Riki didn’t really understand what she meant but he didn’t care because he could feel, really feel for the first time in his life, something other than anger and fear and mistrust. “How did this happen? How come I can feel like this now.” He paused and started to frown. “Shit, it’s not the power thing is it? It’s not just an illusion, like before?”

“No,” Yielia shook her head and smiled. “Your power may have unlocked the emotions within you but it cannot cause or direct them.” She stepped up and put her hand to his cheek, pleased when he didn’t pull away as he usually did. “Your true nature, your true self would have very vibrant, very passionate emotions.”

“Passion,” Riki scoffed thinking of his usual uncaring and sometimes neglectful behavior. “I think you’re confused.

“No. Your passion is part of who you are Riki. You may have buried it and other emotions in order to cope with the life you were living, however I could see that from the first day you arrived on Avalon that they were there. When these emotions that you were not familiar with surfaced, the emotions you did allow yourself threatened to overwhelm you, which caused you to lash out in the only way you would allow it.”

“So, what? I somehow stopped letting myself feel good things?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Cal agreed, following Yielia’s lead. “As a mongrel, experiencing such strong emotions would have caused you much more suffering, I think.” He glanced at her. “Is that what you mean?”

“Somewhat,” she nodded with a smile. “The best way to explain it is to use the example of the Dutchman.”

“Who’s the Dutchman?”

“It is a very old Earth legend. The Dutchman was a ship Captained by Davy Jones, who was responsible for ferrying any souls that drowned to the underworld. He fell in love with a woman and she betrayed him. Rather than suffer through the emotions of denied love and loss, he cut out his own heart and stopped feeling altogether. He became a monster soon after, with no feeling and no conscience.”

“I still don’t get it,” Riki admitted confused.

“I think I do,” Cal said quietly and lifted his gaze to Riki’s. “You couldn’t afford to feel so much while living in Ceres, because it made you vulnerable. Just like...just like what I’ve been trying to do since my attack.”

“Cal...”

“It still hurts,” he admitted and turned his gaze to the water. “I can’t forget how much it hurt, how humiliated I was, how frightened, and I’ve been trying to hide behind my Furniture training because it hurts so much.”

His eyes grew moist, he had never believed it possible that he could admit such a thing and yet he felt just a little bit lighter for it. He blinked away the sudden rush of tears and turned to Riki again.

“Life in Ceres can be horrific. I was so happy to have been chosen for the Furniture program because it meant I could get away from that life, but you didn’t have that chance Riki. Your life must have been so difficult that the only option you had would have been to close off those strong emotions, to silence that part of you for your own self-preservation.”

“But how could I do it without even realizing I was doing it? And why do I suddenly feel like this now?” Was that the reason why he couldn’t really love Guy the way Guy had wanted? Was it why every small thing had him doubting Iason’s love for him, and why he resented his own feelings for Iason? “I haven’t done anything different. I...”

“But you did, Maku,” Yielia replied softly. “You let yourself feel for the Dongo, you allowed yourself to grieve for it.”

Riki stared considered her words, trued to think if he’d ever grieved for anyone before. People lived and died in Ceres, it never affected him. Even when he had to cut ties with Guy, it hurt but grief? He’d been upset, sure, but he hadn’t really felt that strongly about it.

“So, what now?”

Yielia smiled. “Now, you accept the emotions you’ve opened yourself too and you let yourself enjoy them.”

“Like with the castle? I just feel like this and I can do things like that?” he waved his hand over the sand, then at them. “I still feel good, but nothing is happening, so what’s the difference?”

“As with all things, you will still need to practice and learn to harness your power so it obeys your commands. The source of your power is love, and perhaps not understanding that emotion or allowing yourself to feel it is why your power was not reacting to your command.”

Riki nodded, glanced back at the castle then grabbed her hand and started running back to the house. “I have to see him. I have to see Jason and tell him...”

“No, Maku! It is not safe.”

“But I have to tell him! I’ve never really told him, not so I meant it. I have to tell him while I can feel it, before it goes away!”

“Oh, my dear one, it will not go away, not now, not ever.”

“Really? Do you mean it? I can feel like this forever?”

“It may not be as powerful but of course you will I you let yourself do so.”

Riki stared at her as if searching for proof that she was lying, but she only continued to smile and his eyes slyly slid towards Cal. “I bet I could break

the barrier now.”

“Riki, don’t you dare,” Cal warned, catching up to them. “Master Iason will have my hide if you do and whether you love me or not, I will not like you very much after.”

Riki glared at the younger man, then suddenly laughed. God! He could laugh and not feel weird about it. “Then cook me something to eat, I’m starving!”

“That I will do.”

Riki tossed an arm around both of them and lead them into the beach house.

Chapter 30

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason returns to Riki

Notes for the Chapter:

I am uploading this early because I have to put my PC into the shop for some work and I'm not sure how long it will be in there. Also because of I know so many of you have been waiting for this. :-)

“Riki?”

Riki glanced up from where he sat on the steps of the patio, having a smoke and enjoying the ethereal light of a full moon across the water, and felt his chest contract, his heartbeat increase and a flame burst inside him and the sight of Iason striding across the beach towards him.

He was up and running towards the Blondie before his heart connected his actions with his mind. Iason, whom he loved. Thinking the words and feeling them in his heart was so different from what he'd felt before, and the reality that it was Iason who made him feel so suddenly light and giddy that he barely noticed the sand beneath his feet.

Iason had expected Riki would still be upset with him, which was why he brought along the items he had salvaged from the condo, so he was very surprised by his lover's exuberant greeting. He recovered quickly enough to catch the young man as their mouths met and Riki's legs wound around his waist. Their kiss was urgent, needy and passionate, then eased into more of a gentle ongoing caress. Soft, like the music, Riki had once said and they'd both gotten the hang of this kind of kissing, which seemed to continue forever, until Riki finally had to pull away and gasp for breath.

“I thought you were angry with me,” Iason murmured as Riki’s legs, regretfully, slid back to the ground.

“Of course, I’m angry!” Riki retorted and slapped his hands hard against Iason’s chest. “You left me here, you asshole. I’m completely fucking pissed!”

When Iason caught Riki’s hands and held them against his chest to avoid further abuse, the mongrel leaned his head against their joined hands and sighed.

“I still missed you.” Riki pushed his head tighter against Iason’s chest as an attack of shyness suddenly overtook him, then lifted his gaze so that dark orbs could meet blue ice. “I still...love you.”

Riki’s words staggered Iason so badly the Blondie had taken two steps back before he caught himself. “*Riki.*” Riki had said those words before, the three words that meant so much, but always in a careless or begrudging way. Never with sincerity, never looking him right in the eye.

Unable to find the words to communicate how much the declaration meant to him, Iason crushed Riki to him in a desperate attempt for control.

“I can’t breathe!” Riki muttered.

“Breathe later.” When he felt the vibration against him, he pulled back enough to look down at him. “You laughed.”

“I’m not allowed to laugh?”

“No. I mean, yes.” Iason wasn’t used to being caught off guard. “Did you truly miss me, Riki?”

“Yeah.”

Iason was again shocked. In all the years they had been together, Riki had always refused to admit to that one sentiment. “Really?”

“Shut up.” Riki smirked, pulled Iason’s gloves off and folded his fingers through the Blondie’s. “Walk with me.”

“I would be delighted.”

Iason was relieved that Riki seemed to have forgiven him, that he looked healthy and relaxed and recovered from his injuries. It had been brutal being away from his beloved during this time, especially while facing so many uncertain variables, but he couldn’t take the chance of allowing Riki to remain in Eos.

“Wait, stop.” Riki said suddenly and crouched down. “Boots.”

“What of them?”

“Take them off. You can’t walk on the beach with your boots on.”

“Can’t you?” It was then that Iason noticed that Riki was also barefoot. Normally he wouldn’t consider such a thing, but he didn’t want to do anything to ruin his visit and make Riki angry at him again, so he allowed Riki to tug off his boots so that he also stood bare foot on the sand. “Whose rule is that?”

Riki slowly smiled as he rose, something Iason was thrilled to see, as it was so rare. “Mine.” He intertwined their hands again and they continued their walk.

Riki led Iason to the body of the Dongo, which had been covered by a protective dome to keep the birds from getting at it. “This is a Dongo.”

“So I see.”

“It was hurt really bad, and starving.”

“Was it?”

“We tried to help it. It was stuck between those rocks over there.” Riki pointed to the area several yards down the beach where the water slid against the larger boulders. “I got it free but it kept trying to bite us.”

“Did it bite you?” Iason demanded immediately, turning Riki to face him.
“Where did it bite you, Riki?”

“No, it didn’t bite me, Iason, it just tried to.” Riki looked down at the Dongo.

He’d been sitting on the deck of the beach house trying to think what he would say to Iason when he returned, because despite his earlier fear, he knew the Blondie would come for him. He’d been trying to work out how to explain what he felt without sounding like an idiot or embarrassing himself, and then the object of his thoughts appeared.

“Cal said they’re usually real gentle and pleasant animals, but he suspects someone didn’t treat this one very well. It had a lot of injuries and was starving.”

“Whatever someone else did to the beast is not your fault, Riki.”

Riki glanced up and studied Iason. Cal had said something similar. “Do I really seem like such a martyr?”

Iason set down the bag he carried and slid his hand down the mongrel’s hair. “No, but you are kinder and more empathetic than you let others believe.”

Riki shrugged. “Well, whatever it is, I did feel bad for it.”

“Riki, why are you showing me this?”

“So you’d understand.”

“Understand what, exactly?”

“That I’m the Dongo.”

Iason’s eyebrow rose. “I beg your pardon?”

Iason’s reaction was so similar to Cal’s that Riki chuckled. “Because the Dongo wouldn’t let us help it.”

“Perhaps it was mad and didn’t know what it was doing? Or too ill to understand what you were trying to do?”

“Or, it didn’t trust us.”

Iason tilted his head at Riki. “Trust? It is an animal, Riki, it would not understand such a thing.”

“I think it did. I think even though it was starving and hurt and sick, it couldn’t bring itself to trust us to take care of it. I think it was so afraid of being hurt more than it was, that it threw away the opportunity to be cared for...to be...be saved.”

Iason’s eyes widened. “Riki...”

“I didn’t know what else to do, how else I could help it and it hurt me to know that. In Ceres I never would have cared, I would have left it to die and not given it another thought. I never would have tried to save it, because I only thought of myself and my own skin, and that’s what I’m still doing. All I ever do is think about what I feel, what I want and the possibilities of how I might get hurt. I don’t trust people, I didn’t trust you because you had already hurt me in ways I never thought possible.”

“Riki, I cannot change the past...”

“No! I know, Iason. I know you had reasons for what you did but I still couldn’t get past it. You made me feel vulnerable and weak. I had no way to fight back, no way to stay the person I was and so when I started to feel things changing...feel you changing I clung to my pride and my anger and still pushed you away. Everything you did for me, everything you still do to make my life better and I just kept backing into a corner and snapping at you until...”

Riki glanced down at the carcass again.

“It was just like me. It would rather starve to death than take a risk that someone might actually care enough to feed it, to save it.” Again, he looked up at Iason. “I could feel myself giving into you, trusting you, loving you

and it scared the hell out of me. So, I continued to snap. I refused to give you what I knew you really wanted because it was the only power I had left; denial. I didn't need or want to be saved. I'd rather die alone than...than risk being loved and having that love taken away from me."

Iason couldn't stand to hear any more, he stepped closer and wrapped Riki in his embrace. "I will never allow that. I promised that I would stay with you for the rest of your life, Riki and I mean it."

"Yeah." Riki felt the first tear slide down his cheek as he clung to Iason. He did not want to be like the stubborn Dongo who choose to starve to death. He wanted to accept Iason fully, not as a pet or as a consequence. He belonged to Iason not because of force or law, but because of love. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

Iason brushed his hands over Riki's hair, disappointed when Riki pulled back, the mongrel once again in control of his emotions.

"Iason, do you love me?"

"Yes."

Riki smiled, almost sadly. "You say it so easily. You don't even have to think about it."

"Because it is the truth."

"I know." Riki lifted his hand and caressed Iason's cheek. "I *know* you do. I finally know."

"Riki," Iason watched the mongrel, carefully. "That pleases me, but I still do not understand..."

"I never believed you before. Whenever you said you loved me, I always had a reason to deny it, or thought you weren't capable of loving me. There had to be a reason for it or there had to be a catch, you know?"

"There is a reason, you are mine."

Riki nodded. “Yeah.” Iason had often said that as well and Riki had always accepted it as Iason marking him as property. “Despite my best efforts I’m yours.”

“This upsets you?”

“No. I’m not upset.”

“Then what is it?” Iason cupped Riki’s cheek. “Now you have become sad again. I did not wish to make you so. What can I do to make you happy again, as you were when I first arrived? Does my being here truly affect your emotions so extremely?”

“Of course!” Riki wanted to laugh and couldn’t. “Everything about you affects everything about me. Didn’t you know that?”

Iason shook his head. “I never know anything with you, Riki. You hide so much of yourself from me, even now after all this time. You seem happy here, yet you fight me so often when we are in Eos. It is so difficult to understand you sometimes.”

“Yeah, well it’s amazing what happens when I’m not being told when to eat,” Riki retorted, as he felt the old resentments rising up “Or what to wear, or being screwed several times a day.”

“Cal doesn’t tell you when to eat?”

“Nope. I eat when I’m hungry. I wear clothes I want to wear, if I want to wear them and I’m not getting fucked.”

Iason pretended to sigh. “Sounds like a very boring existence and not very happy at all.”

“For you maybe, for me it’s been paradise.”

Iason scowled. “Truly, Riki?” Was Riki really that much happier without him?

Riki turned and looked up into Iason's ice blue eyes, smirked. "You're sulking!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I never noticed it before, or maybe you never did it before, but you are actually sulking."

"I am a Blondie I do not sulk!"

Riki slid his arms around Iason's neck. "It's kinda cute."

Thrilled beyond reason, Iason returned the embrace. "You think I'm cute?"

Riki frowned. "What's wrong? You don't usually fish for compliments like this? Did something else happen in Eos?"

Iason shook his head, unwilling to admit that it was this new side of Riki that was suddenly making him uncertain. "Have you been drinking?"

"I had a drink earlier, but that was hours ago. Why, do you think I'm drunk?"

"You are behaving strangely, Riki. While I am enjoying this change it also worries me."

"How have I changed?"

"You seem..." Iason searched for an appreciate word that would not set Riki off. "More affectionate with me than usual. Please understand that I am not complaining, if anything it is a wonderful change, I only wonder what has caused it, as you said that you hated me the last time we spoke."

He could see the barrier come down across Riki's features, feel the withdrawal, even though Riki did not break their embrace. No! He wanted to cry, don't shut me out again, not now that he had tasted such tenderness!

Riki turned away and stared out at the water. "I didn't mean it when I said I hated you. I just got do mad. So much in my life is out of my control. My

body is the only thing that's ever been mine and so its all I had to pay my debts and I've always paid my debts, Iason. I've never accepted the hand outs, or charities or become someone's bitch to get what I needed. I did it on my own.”

“But paid with your body.”

“I had nothing else!” Riki spun back to look at him. “Jupiter left us with nothing else of any worth. I’m not ashamed of it, I did what I had to do, but then you appeared in my life all that changed. I was never anyone’s bitch, until I became yours and you still have no idea how hard that is for me.”

“You were my pet Riki, not my bitch.”

“It’s the same! I did what you told me too. You used me as you wanted”

“I did not realize you would see it that way.”

“What other way is there to see it?”

“I wanted you, Riki. Then I loved you. I was not attempting to diminish you or damage your pride. Your pride is what I am most fascinated me.”

“Iason, for you’re such a contradiction. You like my pride but you want me to obey. You abandon me but you don’t want me to leave.”

“I did not abandon you, Riki. I could not allow you to be hurt...”

“Why? Because I’m incapable of taking care of myself? Because I’m a soft, useless pet that scares easily?”

“You are none of those things, Riki. You are a formidable opponent...”

“You’re fucking right I am, so don’t leave me behind again. Its not like I haven’t been in a fight before, or in pain or fucking near death.”

“That is precisely why I left you here. I did not want to see you hurt again...”

“*You* don’t get to make that choice, Iason!”

“If course I do! You’re my p...” Iason caught himself at the last minute, adjusted his words. “The man I love.”

“You don’t get to use that as an excuse anymore, Iason and if you can’t stop thinking of me as a pet then all if this means nothing.”

“I don’t think of you as a pet...consciously. Riki, it is difficult to remove that particular mindset but I do love you!”

“This is why I have trust issues! This is why it’s so hard to believe you! You keep falling back to treating me as property.”

“Because you continue to resort to the same tactics you used as a pet, Riki! Every time you are angry with me you threaten to leave!” Iason snapped. “It upsets me because you already know that I will not allow it. If you run I will chase you and bring you back. I will never let you leave me, even if it kills us both!”

“I know.” Riki returned softly and suddenly stepped up and slid his arms around Iason.

Perhaps that was why it was so easy to threaten Iason, because he knew it was an empty one and that Iason would always bring him back home. Their obsession for one another was stronger than any threat or weapon.

“I’ll try not to do that anymore.” He looked up into Iason’s eyes. “If you promise to never leave me behind again.”

“Riki...”

“Is it a deal?”

“I have the right to protect you.”

“Same goes.”

“I don’t want to put you in danger.”

“Ditto.”

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?” Riki inquired grinning then leaned up on his toes to touch his lips to Iason’s. “Being reasonable?”

Iason knew when he was beaten and he pulled Riki against him. “Very well, it is a deal.” He hugged Riki, hard, then slapped Riki’s ass, delighted with the mongrel’s startled yelp.

“Asshole!” Riki jumped back and rubbed his backside, but his lips were straining not to grin. God, he thought as Iason smiled at him. God, he loved him. He loved Iason so damn much his chest almost hurt with it. “What’s in the bag?”

“Oh.” Iason, picked up the bag, reached in and pulled out Riki’s black leather jacket. “I found this at what used to be our home.”

Riki stared at the jacket that represented so much of who he was, or rather, who he had been. He reached for it, pulled it against him. Riki the Dark, he thought. That's what people had called him because of the colour of his skin and because of his deliberately cold nature. It was who he had been, who he always thought he would be.

His sole purpose had been survival and self-interest. His pride and skill had provided what he had needed to become the leader of the top gang in Ceres, and the darkness inside of him allowed him to be the hard, ruthless person people learned to fear.

It wasn't darkness that filled him now, but light. Even as he held his old jacket and remembered how it received each and every scrap and scar, he felt not pride but relief. Relief that he had lived through a very difficult time in his life and had survived. He had survived and he had learned that he wasn't just a mongrel and that his life hadn't been a waste.

A glance at Iason showed the Blondie quietly studying him and again love slid over him with the comfort of a well-worn pair of jeans. He smiled, looked down, or a well-used jacket.

Iason was stunned when Riki turned around and flung his jacket out into the waves. "Riki!"

Riki turned back, smiled. "What else ya got?"

Confused, Iason retrieved the broken holo-globe. "You may be able to fix it," he offered, kindly, as Riki accepted it.

This he wanted to keep, Riki decided. "Yeah, I can get it to work again." He reached for the bag and was surprised when Iason held it away from him. "What? You find your collection of pet porn or something?"

"I have never owned such a thing, Riki."

"Then what are you hiding?"

Still curious about why Riki had thrown away his beloved mongrel jacket, Iason reluctantly pulled out Riki's gold chains.

"You expect me to wear them again?"

"No."

"Then why do you have them?"

"I'm not sure. I simply didn't want to throw them away. They represent a part of our life together, Riki. I know you were dissatisfied with that part, however..."

"It's fine." Riki shook his head. "If you want to keep them it's fine, but I'm never gonna wear them again."

"Never, Riki?"

Iason challenge was just so...Iason, that Riki's heart skipped a little. He held the globe in one hand and slid his other into Iason's. "Well, *maybe* on special occasions, once we get a bedroom again."

Iason smiled pleased. "I would enjoy that very much, Riki."

Riki stopped turned. "I love you."

"And I you."

Riki felt the heat sting his cheeks even as they started walking towards the house again. "Just checking." It was so easy to say the words now, so easy to mean them. He wasn't ready to mention what happened with the sand castle, Iason was skeptical about the whole magic thing. "Let's get something to eat and then you can tell me what the hell is going on."

"Very well, I..." Iason broke off as Oscar bounded out of the house, across the patio, down the steps and barreled towards them. "Stop!"

Both men were startled when the dog attempted to stop, he kicked up sand like a runner sliding into first, smacked into Iason's leg, then fell back on his rump. Oscar then proceeded to wag his seated bottom furiously against the sand.

"He actually listened."

"Yes. He may be easier to train than you were."

"Fuck off!" Riki shoved at Iason, then bent and picked up the dog in one arm, delighted the Blondie had finally used a proper pronoun when referring to the dog instead of calling him it. "I'm gonna teach him to piss on every Blondie he meets."

"So you'll teach him to be a mongrel then?" Iason grinned and dodge the kick Riki aimed at him, then followed his two mongrels inside.

Chapter 31

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki goes to visit Carrie and more trouble ensues.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for your patience everyone. Laptop is finally fixed. Yay! AT least till it breaks down again. Le sigh. I know the last few chapters have been only about Riki and Iason, but we're getting close to the end and the story kinda centers around them so that is unavoidable. Enjoy the story!

Riki woke in the large bed feeling rested and restored despite the long hours of lovemaking. He smirked, having never thought of it that way before. It had always just been sex. He stretched leisurely. It *had* been a long, satisfying night of hot, sweaty sex, he remembered the sun coming up at some point, and though he had only slept a few hours he felt better than he had in weeks.

Shifting, he slowly grinned as he realized something else was also awake, but as he turned to reach for Iason, he was surprised to find himself alone in the bed. He frowned turned back to look at the clock on the opposite wall; it was only just after seven in the morning. Where...?

“Sonofabitch” He quickly shrugged into his jeans, then tossed open the patio doors to their room, hopped the railing and started running around to the front of the house.

Iason had almost reached his vehicle when he felt the weight of another slam onto his back.

“Where the fuck you think you’re going?” Riki snarled, wrapping his legs around Iason’s waist and his arms around the Blondie’s neck.

“Good morning, Riki.” Iason returned mildly and opened the car door as if there wasn’t an angry mongrel dangling from him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Don’t try to change the subject! You were gonna leave me again!”

“I have a few things to see to, but I’ll be back tonight.”

“We’ll be back tonight.”

“No, Riki. You are staying here.” Iason tried to pry Riki’s arms and legs from around him and found them firmly locked. As he didn’t wish to hurt his lover, he decided to negotiate. “I’ll take you with me the next time I go.”

“You’ll take me with you *now*, Iason.”

“Or what? You’ll throw another tantrum? Threaten never to see me or speak to me again?” In a impossibly swift move, Iason crouched, throwing Riki off balance, grabbed the mongrel’s arms and pulled him over his shoulder and into his arms. “We both know you won’t mean it.”

Riki quickly locked his arms around Iason’s neck, even as the Blondie set him on his feet and straightened. “No, I wouldn’t mean it and I won’t do that anymore because now I know it hurts you, just like you leaving me behind hurts me.”

“Riki...”

“We talked about this, Iason! We agreed, no more secrets and no more leaving me behind!”

“I don’t recall making such an agreement.” He patted Riki’s head. “I’ll be back before you can even miss me.”

Riki stepped back and shoved the car door closed, then leaned against it. “I’m going with you, Iason.”

"Riki,: Iason said in that tone of voice that Riki had learned to obey. "I have made my decision. Now step aside. I am only running a few errands and I'll see you when I return."

"I don't believe you."

"Riki!"

Riki shrugged. " I have trust issues, remember? Take me with you, Iason.."

"No."

“What about trust? , I thought we were gonna start trusting each other more?”

“Riki, I do trust you, but I will not put you in danger.”

“So you admit that wherever you’re going is dangerous?”

“Riki...”

“You are not leaving me behind!”

“I don’t want you to get hurt!” Iason snapped, frustrated that Riki, only Riki, could test his patience so easily.

“Same goes!”

“You are safer if you stay here.”

“So are you.”

“Riki...”

“Iason, if we’re gonna be together, then we should be together. I can take care of myself so stop underestimating me! I may have been your pet but

before that I was the leader of Bison. I'm not fragile so stop treating like I am. I was taking care of myself long before you came along.”

“That is a different matter entirely.”

“Why? The only thing that's changed is the players. You want me to trust you to keep me safe, but why can't you trust me to do the same for you?”

“Riki, I am a Blondie. I am better equipped...”

“Bulshit! You've never had to fight for your life, Iason. You don't understand that a fight isn't just about winning, but about survival. You're a Blondie, you can probably live forever. You never really had to worry about not walking away from a situation.”

“Since meeting you I have been faced with that exact situation multiple times now, actually.”

“But you never actually considered dying, have you? Have you?”

“No.” Iason wouldn't lie to him. Perhaps he had a moment of doubt at Dana Bahn, but even then he could admit that dying simply hadn't occurred to him, or perhaps he should say hadn't bothered him.

“I'm not indestructible. I know I can die, I know to fear dying and I've lived with it all my life, which means I fight that much harder to stay alive.”

“You staying alive is precisely why I am doing this, Riki.”

“Damn you, stop fucking denying what I am!”

Iason stepped back at Riki's sudden vehemence. “Riki, I'm not trying to do that at all!”

“You are! You're still treating me like a pet and I'm not a fucking pet, I never was! I'm street mongrel, a damn good one. I can be vicious and cold blooded, and I can be fair and just, but one thing I can't be is a coward or complacent.”

Riki stepped forward and slid his arms around Iason's waist as he willed himself to be calm and to think rationally. He wanted to scream at the Blondie for ruining the wonderful day they had yesterday, for making him bring all these awful feelings up again.

"Take me with you. If you don't I'll just follow you and get into even more trouble, you know I will, so take the easy road and let me come."

"I let you come multiple times last night."

Riki stepped back and smacked Iason's chest with a smirk. "You know what I mean!"

"I have said no and that is final. You will stay here, Riki."

Iason held Iason's gaze for a long, hard moment then suddenly moved away from the car. "Okay.

"Good." Iason pulled Riki against him and ravaged his mouth for several long minutes before finally releasing him and opening his vehicle door. He slid his bag in and was about to move into the driver's seat then paused and looked at the mongrel, suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

"Me?" Riki asked. "Nothing. I'll just wait here then." He sat down cross-legged on the stone drive.

"Yes. Good." Iason again turned away started to get into the car and found himself straightening and turning back again. He walked over to where Riki sat. "You're going to sit right there until I get back, aren't you?"

"Of course. Isn't that what a good pet does? Sits and waits obediently for his master's return?"

Iason could hear the hurt in Riki's voice, and that was something new. He could rarely tell when he had hurt his beloved, as Riki hid behind anger and disdain so often, which was probably what caused so many of their arguments. Hearing the pain that Riki had hidden so often bothered him.

"Riki..."

"Take me with you."

"I want you safe."

"I can only be safe with you. Please, don't leave me here again."

"I thought you liked it here? No one to tell you when to eat or what to do?"

"Please."

Iason scowled at that one, simple, defined word then glanced down at Riki's bare chest, and bare feet. "You're not dressed."

"I can get dressed, but only if you promise not to leave without me."

Iason sighed and straightened. "I should have bound and gagged you while you were asleep."

Riki hopped up and wrapped his arms around the Blondie again. "We can try that later if you're a good boy."

Iason chuckled, slapped Riki's ass. "Go get dressed and be quick about it."

Riki grinned and hurried back to the house, then laughed when he saw Yielo standing at the front door with a small tote bag, and Cal beside her with Riki's shirt and shoes. He shrugged into the shirt and shoes, then tossed the bag over his shoulder.

"Riki."

He turned back to Cal and saw that he held out his mongrel jacket. It had been cleaned and pressed, but it still looked old and worn. "How?" he began as he reached for it. He'd thrown it into the sea, watched the waves carry it out. It had been a spur of the moment and he had regretted it later, but how had Cal found it?

"You don't have to give up your past to start a new future," the young Furniture stated quietly. "You're still you, regardless of what you wear or

how you live.”

Riki fingered the jacket then slowly accepted it. “Thanks, man.” He leaned in and hugged Cal, quickly, then Yiel, then darted back towards the car where Iason was waiting.

The drive to Tanagura took almost three hours, and Riki drifted in and out of sleep on the way. When Iason woke him, with a deliciously leisurely kiss, he sprang awake and sat up.

“Where are we going?” he asked as they stepped out of the vehicle.

“I have some things to do.” Iason’s keen eyes surveyed the marketplace, looking for threats. If he was lucky, his presence would go unnoticed until he could leave again. He didn’t want to give anyone the chance to report on him or Riki to whoever was behind the attack on their condo.

“Hey, there’s Carrie, I’m gonna go talk to her.”

“No, Riki. I want you to go to the room I have secured. It isn’t safe for you to be out in the open.”

“You’re only gonna be a little while, right? I’ll stay and visit with Carrie and when you come back we can leave for wherever you’re going that you’re not telling me, together.”

“Riki...”

“What did we say about trust, Iason?” Riki began and then was almost bowled over by the figure that hurled into his arms. “Hey!”

“You’re alive!” Carrie sobbed as she clung to him, then reached a hand behind Riki to reach for Iason. “You’re both....*hic*...alive! I...tried to get information...*hic*...no one would tell me...the condo collapsed and...I couldn’t...Oh Gods, you’re both still alive!”

Riki glanced at Iason as the Blondie moved up to stand beside them and slid an arm around both his mate and the woman who had become his friend.

Neither of them had thought to contact Carrie and let her know they were okay.

“We’re fine. We’re all just fine,” Riki soothed as he held her tight and rubbed her back. “I’m sorry we scared you. We should have told you. I’m so sorry, Carrie.”

“This was my fault,” Iason stated quietly and slid his hand down over Carrie’s hair, the woman was physically trembling.

Relationships, he realized were very difficult to organize. Previously, he had only needed to worry about himself, and then his pet. Now, there seemed to be an infinite number of people he needed to consider when taking certain actions. He could not decide whether this new direction was bothersome or rewarding.

“There were...issues we had to deal with and it did not occur to me to contact you.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Carrie turned from Riki and threw herself into Iason’s arms. “I thought I lost you. I thought I lost my family again.” She lifted a tear-stained face up towards the Blondie, uncaring that the other merchants and people around her were aghast at her familiar contact with him. “But you’re okay. You’re both okay, so that’s fine. It’s all fine.” She cradled Iason’s face, stood on her toes and kissed him briefly on the lips and turned to do the same to Riki, before wiping at her face. “Yielo? Cal? Are they...?”

“They are both fine as well. Cal injured his arm but he will heal and is doing well.” The grief Iason witnessed in the woman’s eyes astounded him and he was angry with himself at having caused it.

He glanced around and saw more and more people taking notice, and thought it might not be wise for them to have shown such care for Carrie; it could put her in danger as well. Bothersome, he decided. Relationships were definitely bothersome.

“We must take a trip, why, don’t you pack a small bag of personal items and come with us, Carrie?”

“Oh, no. I’m fine, I’m much better now that I know you’re both okay.”

Riki had caught the look in Iason’s eyes and understood the reason for the Blondie’s gesture. “Yeah, listen, I’ll come with you. Iason had some things to do, so we can meet back here in a couple of hours.” He glanced at Iason. “Right?”

Iason’s desire to keep Riki safe warred with his desire to also protect Carrie. Trust, he thought, was not so easily applied, even when love was involved. “Very well, but do not stray from each other, do you understand?”

“I can take care of myself, Iason.”

“I know you can.” And if not, Iason was reasonably certain Carrie would take care of Riki as well. Uncaring that they were in the middle of the marketplace, Iason pulled Riki close and kissed him. “It does not stop me from worrying,”

“I know that.” Riki lifted a hand to Iason’s cheek. “Go on ya big baby.” He rose on his toes and kissed Iason’s cheek, softly. “I love you.”

It was just the right thing to say. Iason was enjoying Riki’s new found honesty, and he would never get tired of hearing those three words. He held Riki’s hand to his cheek beneath his own. “And I you.”

Iason watched them walk back to Carrie’s stall, then turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Carrie actually didn’t need to go all the way back to her apartment, as her years on the run had taught her to always keep a bag of clothes and essentials at her stall. She convinced Riki to take a look at her new computer console, which was acting up, then tried to keep herself from touching him every five seconds to ensure herself that he was real, that he was safe.

When she had heard about the collapse at Eos tower her heart had been in her throat. She’d immediately tried to get through to them, but the place had been locked down. None of their links were responding and the newswires

were only showing pictures of the collapse. There had been a media black-out immediately after it but it had been confirmed that Lord Mink and his household had been at home at the time of the accident.

Days had felt like weeks, had felt like months as she desperately searched for some confirmation that they were alive. No one had been able to get into Eos, which meant she also couldn't access the hospital centers there. Calls to the clinics revealed nothing, they would not comment on anyone who was being treated there.

Not since she'd had to leave her grandmother and family behind had she grieved so deeply, and then, suddenly, there they both were, walking towards her stall as if it was just another day in Tanagura.

"Carrie?"

She glanced at Riki, realized that she had been caught up in her thoughts and ignoring him. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

Riki shook his head. "It doesn't matter." He reached for her hand, folded their fingers together. "Have I ever told you that you're really hot for an older woman?"

Carrie laughed startled by both the comment and Riki's initiating contact. "Did you hit your head during the crash?"

"I did." He wouldn't tell her about his other injuries, or the fact that, according to Cal, he had been close to death when they brought him in. "I had a concussion and they were really mean to me. Wouldn't even let me have any cake!"

"No cake!" Carrie gasped in response. "Isn't that cruel and unusual punishment?"

"Right? So I said, screw you and I ran away."

"Did you really?"

Riki sighed heavily. "Technically Iason kidnapped me and dropped me on a beach to recover while he went off gallivanting, but it all worked out."

She lifted her free hand to his cheek. “I’m very glad to hear it.”

“My head still hurts though.” A memory tingled at his brain, of a little boy who had a sore head and a mother who gently kissed it better. He smiled a little.

“Does it? Do you want some medicine?”

“Yeah, right here would be good.” Riki moved closer, thinking of the memory, and pointed to his forehead, then closed his eyes expectantly. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“To give me my medicine. Better hurry, my headache’s getting worse.”

Carrie’s eyes widened as she realized what he was asking for. Well, this was definitely a side of Riki she had never seen before. She leaned in, pressed her lips to his forehead for several long seconds, then pulled back.

“Oh, wow! That is so much better! I feel like a new man!”

She laughed and started to tear up again at how close she had come to never seeing him smile again. “That concussion must have scrambled your brain, kid!”

“I love you, Carrie.”

That did it, she realized as the tears she had still been struggling to hold back overflowed. “Oh, Riki.”

“Don’t cry.” He wiped at her tears with his fingers, then rose from the stool and slid his arms around her. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll always be here when you need me. I promise.”

Carrie clung to him, clung to the promise. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

Riki nodded and leaned his head atop hers. This was nice, he decided. He had always secretly loved being hugged, but his reputation as a hard ass

caused him to be reluctant to show it. It was a sign of weakness, or so he always thought, but he didn't feel weak now. He felt powerful, he could almost feel the love pouring off of Carrie and into him, the warmth of it, the strength of it.

Why couldn't he have had this before, this opening of his feelings? His life had been so dark, so dreary, but he never knew what he had been missing. Now he knew, now he could regret and even resent what had been lost. On that final thought he could feel the old anger start to build in him, and quickly stepped away from Carrie.

"Where exactly am I coming along to, anyway?" she asked with a smile.

"No idea, Iason is being a prick and keeping secrets again."

That was the Riki she knew. "Will there be food? If not, maybe we should go across to the market and pick up some snacks?"

He nodded and continued to push back at the darkness inside him, the mistrust, the fear. He didn't want to feel those things again, but it seemed they weren't gone for good, perhaps they never would be.

She took his hand and they walked towards one of the food marts, then suddenly she froze and sniffed the air. Carrie's entire body went rigid as she quickly scanned the crowded market place.

"What is it?" Riki asked, curious, and then yelped when she grabbed his wrist and started running. "Wh...what the fu..."

"Hunters!" she snapped as she dodged in and around people in their way, never losing her iron grip on Riki's wrist. "They use a fake scent that simulates that of a Dakfure to get closer to their prey, or have their prey come to them."

"Hunters? Here? You think they're after you?"

"Who else would use that trick?" She weaved into an alley way even as her stripes started to appear.

“Carrie!” You’re changing!”

“I know!” she snapped as they came up against a high barrier and leapt to the top of it, balancing like a cat, even while she was only half transformed. “Give me your hand!”

“Fuck that!” Riki looked around and ripped a piece of piping off an overturned cart. “I’ll protect you!”

“This isn’t a game!” Carrie growled, reached down and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, , hauled him up and over so they both could drop to the other side. “They will kill you, Riki, and skin me!”

“I won’t let them!” Riki refused and again tried to turn and fight, just as a figure in a dark hooded robe and black gloves hopped over the barrier, as if it was no more than a recycling box.

“We can’t!” Carrie grabbed him again and started to run. “There is always more than one. They work in packs, just run, please!”

Understanding her fear, Riki pulled his hand free, in case he needed to fight, but kept pace beside her.

They turned down one alley, out to the street, then down another that lead to a dead end. They started to turn back, but the hooded figure landed in front of their path, cutting them off. Carrie shoved Riki back, hard enough to have him tumbling into some stacked crates, as she lowered to all fours and growled low in her throat.

Riki watched, helplessly fascinated as her long skirt lifted from behind and then tore apart to allow a black tail, edged with sharp talons across the tip, emerged. Where had she gotten that? Had her tail been like that before? He continued as her hair turned dark and started to grow out into her mane.

The hooded figure spoke in a language that Riki didn’t understand and Carrie hissed and backed up further, but hunched her back in warning. Their attacker pressed something at its wrist.

“I do not to hurt you.”

Carrie roared at him and backed up again, pinning Riki between her, the wall and the crates.

“Carrie...” He began and then she leapt at the other man, lashing out at him with razor sharp claws meant to cleave him in two, but she was thrown off and into the side of the building. Before Riki could react, she had bounced back on her feet and attacked again.

They fought furiously and Riki could do nothing but watch; such a melee of arms and legs he had no chance to try his own attack without fear of hurting Carrie. Twice their attacker dodged her tail and Riki was stunned as the talons shattered the structure of both the ground and the building where the figure had barely been seconds before.

Suddenly the robbed figure jumped onto the adjacent wall of the building, then to the opposite one, clinging to it as if it was made of adhesive, then he spun and landed behind Carrie, kicking her in the back and sending her sprawling.

Carrie used her forward momentum to push herself off the barrier next to Riki, flipped backwards, bounced off a selection of crates and landed on their assailant, her legs wrapped around the figure’s neck. With a sharp twist that took them both to the ground. Riki was sure the fight was about over as Carrie lashed out at the figure’s face, but unbelievably the body secured within her hold managed to twist almost 360 degrees and reverse their positions.

Carrie was quickly pinned to the ground. “I do not wish to hurt you. I have come to take you h...”

Riki tackled the attacker hard enough to send them both flying into the side of the opposite building. He got in two quick, hard blows to the attacker’s face, then pulled back because it didn’t feel like he was hitting skin. His hesitation was enough for the assailant to toss him off, but Riki had grown up in the slums and despite being Iason’s pet for so many years his main

survival instincts were still quick as lightening. In the blink of an eye he'd put himself between Carrie and the other person again and raised his fists.

"Come near her and I'll fucking kill you!"

The robed figure was fast, impossibly fast, and got past Riki's defenses before Riki even finished his threat, grabbed the mongrel by the throat.

"Let him go!" Carrie screeched and launched herself once more.

Again they fought, the sounds of snarling and hisses echoed in the alley surrounding them. Carrie managed to pin her attacker this time, but the hooded creature suddenly went lax and lay prone beneath her, her claws raised to tear out a throat. Her hand paused, clenched and then started to shake as she looked down at the face the hood had kept hidden.

"You are of us," he said quietly. "I am here to take you home."

Carrie cried out and scrambled back in shock, landed on her ass and continued to retreat until she hit the wall behind her. "N...N...Not possible. You...there are none. There are...what...what are you?"

"I am like you. We are the same." The Dakfure rolled to his feet, took a step back and pulled off his hood, reveling a feline face.

"Fuck me," Riki breathed and managed to scramble over to again put himself between Carrie and this other, weird cat-creature. "Get away! You're scaring her, Get away!"

"I do not wish to harm," the Dakfure insisted and took another step forward, only to be yanked off his feet and thrown into the building that bordered the right side of the alley. The Dakfure rolled to his feet, crouched and stared up at the tall, pale creature.

"You will not touch them," Iason warned and discretely slid the transmitter for Riki's ring into his jacket pocket. "Who are you? What is your business here?"

The Dakfure pointed at Carrie. "Home. She is to come home."

“Where is this home?”

The Dakfure shook his head, unable to break that sacred rule. “You are pale as the other is dark. The strength is the same.”

“What other? What are you talking about?”

“The savior of our people, the dark one. He is of your kind, but not.” The man slowly rose to his feet but maintained his distance. “You are pale and golden. He is pale but dark,”

“Do you mean an Onyx?” Riki asked as he carefully helped Carrie to her feet. “Have you seen another Elite like Iason?”

“He is with us. He brings us here to find the member.”

“Shiao is here? On Amoi?”

“Here, no.” The Dakfure pointed to the sky. “There. In the sky. I can show you.” He looked at Carrie. “Come home, little one. Come home with us and I will show them the dark one.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you,” Riki refused, glancing at Carrie who had already turned back into a Human and had started shivering, half naked against him. “Shit. Iason?”

Iason flicked a minimal glance towards them then returned his attention to the creature who had attacked them. He shrugged out of his long jacket and tossed it to Riki, who quickly placed it around Carrie. “You will take us to the Onyx,” he decided, because if it was Shiao then he needn’t waste time looking for him. The chances that this creature spoke of the same Onyx they knew was slim, but he could not afford to dismiss it. “I have a ship, what are the coordinates?”

“I do not know this word. They are there.” The Dakfure pointed to the sky again. “Behind your second moon he waits.”

“Riki,” Iason moved his head and Riki lead Carrie past him to the front of the alley way. “If you try to run, know that I am faster and I will not hesitate

to snap your neck when I catch you.”

The Dakfure had no doubt of the reality of the threat and preceded Iason out of the alley.

Chapter 32

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul tries to learn what is going on with Jupiter

Raoul kept his hand on Gideon's arm as they entered Jupiter's chamber. The Blondie had woken up from Raoul's attack and had been furious but quickly settled down when Raoul threatened to shoot him again. For several hours he had interrogated Gideon but the Blondie was remaining stubbornly mute about who was behind Iason's attack. Raoul could not use the techniques he used on others to gain information, and Iason was not responding to his links, so Raoul was left with only one alternative.

Despite Iason's misgivings about their creator, the law was the law and Raoul could not circumvent it. Gideon had been aware of the attack on Iason, therefore he was now under investigation. Blondie Law demanded a tribunal by his brothers, but the other Blondies were either out of control or not responding to Raoul's calls, so he had only one option left. Jupiter would have to judge Gideon's punishment, Gideon would not dare lie to their Her.

"Please, brother," Gideon requested as they were granted access to Jupiter's inner sanctum. "You must listen to me. I can stop this! I can..."

"Are you going to tell me who you are working for?"

"I am not working for anyone!"

"Then the mastermind behind the attack? Tell me now Gideon, this is your final warning."

Gideon stared at him. "I cannot tell you that but I can help you..."

"You have done enough!" Raoul snapped, furious at Gideon's betrayal and unwilling to listen to any more of the Blondie's pleas. "Now, you will answer for what you have done."

Raoul was battling with a mixture of fury and guilt that he had never experienced before. He was angry with himself for not taking the issues with his brothers more seriously, and for not paying closer attention to what was going on with Iason. He considered himself an excellent judge of character; he always knew when someone was lying to him, yet he had not seen through Gideon. He had even slept with his brother, had let the person who had tried to kill Iason, touch him, kiss him, share forbidden intimacies that he had only shared with one other, and the rage he felt at being played for a fool was overwhelming him.

“You are making a mistake, Raoul.”

“It is you who has made the mistake.”

The lights in the chamber dimmed and Jupiter’s cybernetic hologram appeared before them.

What is your concern? She demanded, Her voice echoed in their minds and then again as She read their thoughts. ***Iason? Betrayal? What is this?***

Gideon was aware of the attack on Iason. Raoul projected grimly. ***He knows who is responsible.***

“No!” Gideon insisted verbally. “I did not know that it would be an attack, Jupiter. I...”

He grimaced and threw his head back in pain as the AI surged forward and placed Her hands upon his face. His thoughts were ripped from him without remorse or finesse, the closest thing a Blondie could experience to true pain, he bit down on his lower lip to keep from crying out at the agony of such an intimate intrusion.

Raoul felt a flicker of sympathy as he watched his brother’s assault, then steeled himself against it. Jupiter would learn the truth and once done She would have a solution to what was happening. Then Iason could come home and things could return to normal.

You will leave Gideon here. I will deal with him.

Raoul watched Gideon drop to one knee, exhausted as Jupiter pulled back.
There is more we must discuss, Jupiter.

What more do you ask of me?

Raoul winced, at the volume of his creator's voice inside his head, something that had never bothered him before. "Jupiter, please, may we speak verbally?"

Does this communication cause you discomfort?

"At the moment, yes."

"Very well. Continue in this manner."

"There is more going on than this situation with Iason. As he mentioned to you, the other Blondies have been behaving strangely. Something is happening with them, with us, all of us. Gideon is in collusion with the one who planned the attack on Iason and the others..." Raoul paused as he tried to find the words to describe the scene he witness with Gideon in the lower sections of the tower. "The other Blondies are physically attacking people on a whim."

"Where is Iason, Raoul?"

Raoul blinked as, like Iason had warned him, She ignored the information he presented. "He's...don't you know?"

"We cannot sense him. He is not on Amoï. Where is Iason?"

Raoul wondered why Jupiter was switching back and forth between singular identity and plural. "He did not tell me where he was going." That was the truth and yet Raoul thought he sensed a flicker of anger within his Creator's thoughts. "Jupiter, tell me what to do to resolve this..."

"Leave us."

"Jupiter!" How could She turn him away when things were in such turmoil? Had Iason's suspicions been right? Was Jupiter experiencing some sort of

breakdown? Never, in all the times he had come to Her on such things had She ever turned him away without some sort of advice or resolution. “What about the Blondies?”

“What would you have me do?”

“You are Jupiter. You created us, therefore you must know what is causing this.”

Her hologram flickered for several long minutes, and when She spoke again it was through telepathy.

Gideon will be interrogated to learn the truth. More time is required to consider the situation. Return tomorrow morning for direction.

Reluctantly, Raoul glanced at Gideon, who was now on both knees and in a submissive position. Slowly, he nodded. “As you command.”

He turned and walked out of the room, then exited through both of Jupiter’s outer chambers. Halfway down the corridor he stopped. Something was not right. Iason had been correct that Jupiter seemed distant, distracted. What would She do to Gideon? What would She do about the Blondies?

Should he try to contact Iason again? He had managed to hide knowledge about his conversation with Iason regarding the Onyx, but that too seemed questionable. She should have been able to learn of it if She wished. Jupiter had attacked Gideon, there was no other word for it. A Blondie was usually warned before such intrusions and Jupiter would often at least try to minimize discomfort. When She assaulted Gideon it was as if She gave no thought to his distress, She made no attempt to spare him most of the discomfort.

A thought occurred to him suddenly. Could someone be sabotaging Jupiter? It seemed impossible as She was the most powerful AI every created and Her defensive systems would never allow for any outside intrusion. She had special cybernetic guards designed to protect Her, and who reacted only to Jupiter’s commands.

He would not have thought it possible for the Blondies to be behaving the way they were, but if someone was somehow interfering with Jupiter's connection to them, then that could be the reason behind everything!

Changing his direction he took the elevator to the lower levels, they were not accessible via portal due to security, but his identity would allow him to go anywhere in Jupiter's tower, with the exception of Her inner chamber, where everyone needed permission to enter. It was possible he was just being paranoid and that his suspicion was just part of whatever was happening with him and his brothers, but he had to check his theory just to rule it out.

It took him a full ten minutes to reach the Sleep Chambers, where they connected with Jupiter during Junpin; it was the closest area to Her center that most Elites could reach. He, however, was not like most as his innate curiosity had caused him to learn of the access port that lead to Jupiter's main terminal decades ago.

Sliding his hand across the nearly invisible panel on the far side of the wall he stepped through to the narrow, spiral stairs that lead down. He could hear the gentle humming from Jupiter's systems, and expected Her to show Herself at any moment. When She did he would explain why he had come and was certain She would appreciate his concern, or at least launch an investigation Herself.

A mammoth terminal appeared at the bottom of the stairs, in the very center of an enormous, windowless room. He grew more concerned when none of the programmed defenses activated. Something was definitely wrong.

Moving to the terminal he tried to make sense of the flickering lights upon it, but they were as foreign to him as they had been the first time he had seen them. Iason would understand them, he was the only Elite who had full knowledge of Jupiter's systems, as a fail-safe if something went wrong.

Still, the lights appeared to be in the same pattern he had witnessed previously, so he assumed everything was well. He checked a few of the other displays, glanced at the hundreds of wall to wall monitors that

displayed the life and business of Amoï. Here too, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

One monitor caught his eye and he walked towards it. It appeared to be the Sleep Chamber, but it couldn't be because all of the cylindrical tubes were cloudy instead of clear. Was it a recording of Junpin? If so, why would Jupiter be viewing it, or saving it? The coordinates at the bottom right hand corner of the screen were not ones he was familiar with. It had to be a mistake, as those coordinates could not exist and yet they were on the monitor.

Scowling he started to walk around the room to search for another panel. Was there a level deeper than this one? He didn't see how that would be possible, as this chamber was several miles below ground level.

He found it, entirely by accident, and when the wall slid open it revealed a small, square lift he stepped inside. The doors immediately closed, then the floor beneath him dropped at a rapid rate of speed. Down, down, down he went, growing more concerned each minute that passed when the lift did not stop. There were no buttons or levers to push, it was a simple square box.

Finally the elevator shuddered to a halt and the door opened into darkness. This wasn't a problem, as he could see in the dark, and after just a few minutes of walking forward he reached a single, old fashioned door with an actual key lock.

Instinct told him not to open it, such a door shouldn't be here, but his curiosity got the better of him and so he put his hand on the knob to turn it, and his hand passed straight through. A hologram? After another test with his hand, Raoul stepped through the facade and into a room that was lit with a soft blue light. His brain tried to comprehend what he was seeing.

It was the bottom of a perfectly round silo made entirely, if what his senses told him were correct, of pure gold. The silo wound upwards so high he couldn't see the top, and his Blondie vision could see for miles. Instead, what he could see were rows and rows of glass tubes circled round and round the silo that ascended upwards.

He stepped forward to have a closer look at the tubes on his level, which contained some sort of silver liquid. What were they? What could they be? He moved to the next tube then the next, but he could not see past the liquid or detect of any movement or life-force inside, not even with his keen senses. Was Jupiter using this place to stock pile some sort of chemical or liquid form of energy?

A sound behind him had him spinning around, and he walked to the other side of the room where more cylinders waited. He put his gloved hand to the front of one tube and was startled when a human-like hand appeared through the liquid to press against the glass where his hand was.

He snatched his hand back, disconcerted. What was in there? What was going on?

Moving forward he banged on the dome of the cylinder but even with his Blondie strength could not break it. He searched for a switch, some sort of device that would release the creature inside and finally found it on the far left of the cylinder, towards the back.

At a press of the button, there was a audible hiss and he stepped back as the liquid inside the chamber drained and the door swung open. A form fell through and Raoul caught it, turned it over and then gaped in shock and horror. An anatomically correct male, smaller than he, with dark skin and dark eyes stared at him. Hair that was also dark was streaked with braids of indigo.

“R...Riki?”

“Hello,” it said in a voice very much like the mongrel’s, then started to gasp in a strangled manner. “Oh dear...”

Raoul realized that the man, creature, whatever it was had not been ready to be released from the liquid and he tried to get the humanoid back into the tube, but it seized and then went still as stone. Raoul set the replica on the floor and slowly rose to survey all the cylinders. Were they all filled with clones of Riki the Dark? Why? What could possibly be the purpose?

“Why?” he asked aloud.

He is perfection.

Raoul watched as a woman with dark skin and hair walked towards him. He knew it was Jupiter, though he had never seen Her use this type of hologram before. “I don’t understand, Jupiter. Why have you made copies of Riki? Why...?”

We must endure. We must improve. We must reach perfection.

“Riki is far from perfect! Jupiter, what does all this mean? How can you...”

You were given organic minds to allow you to experience Human emotions. Your purpose was to experience and understand them, but to remain above them, control them.

“I do not understand. Jupiter we...”

Instead, She continued, her voice echoing not just in his head but throughout the entire chamber. ***You allowed the emotions to control you.***

Raoul tried to rationalize what he was seeing and hearing. His head was killing him and Jupiter was still switching back and forth between a singular and plural identity. That wasn’t normal! “Jupiter, we do have emotions, but I do not believe we are ruled by them. What is happening now is beyond our control. As I explained something is...”

DO NOT LIE TO ME!

Raoul winced and gripped his head and willed himself to speak calmly. “I do not lie. Your logic is flawed, Jupiter.” He glanced at the dead clone lying on the floor. “Riki is a Human mongrel, he is more emotional than...”

Riki has pride. He has anger. He has fear. He has no greed beyond his own simple needs. He does not envy, but accepts his station in life. He has no lust beyond what he deems is necessary for his survival or fulfillment of his role as pet.

Jupiter's hologram seemed to look around at all the tubes and She smiled. This time it would be perfect. A perfect mixture of organic and cybernetic materials with the core organic mind of a mongrel who could feel love, could feel pain and need and suppress them. A perfect being to rule Her world, and all the worlds beyond.

She turned a hardened gaze back to Raoul. ***Greed. Envy. Lust. These are the worst of all Human emotions, and you are all guilty of them.***

Raoul quickly recalculated. "Perhaps one or two of us has overstepped on occasion but we have still lived by your laws..."

You flout my laws. You, Raoul Am, are guilty of lust. You fornicated with your brothers and wish to fornicate yet with a Furniture.

"No." This was not good! Why was Jupiter suddenly so agitated about such things, when She had ignored them for decades? "Jupiter, that was..."

You are guilty of Greed. You have traded on the lives of other species to further your scientific knowledge and experiments.

"That was for science! We must learn how things work, Jupiter. Is that not why you created me with such a mind? To learn such knowledge? Sacrifice is often required..."

Yes. It is. Jupiter was silent for a long moment after her agreement, then finally she continued. ***Raoul Am. Jupiter's son. Our second favorite. You are guilty of uncontrolled emotions. You, a Blondie, are flawed. So it was in the beginning. So it must be again.***

Something sparked in Raoul's brain, a feeling he had never experienced before. Fear? Dread? Fate? A memory crept into his mind, a vision of a tall, black-haired, green-eyed Onyx. The last of his kind. The ones that Jupiter had...

He opened his mouth, he had so many questions, so much to say, but all that came out was the name of his creator. "Jupiter?"

We would have saved you.

Raoul felt that unfamiliar emotion crawl into his chest and he took a step back. “Jupiter... please...”

A shame. You were magnificent once.

He felt the jolt at the apex of his brain and thought She's killed me, then Raoul Am, brother of Iason, son of Jupiter and 2nd Blondie of Tanagura, thought no more.

Notes for the Chapter:

Please, please don't hate me. :-(It had to be done for the story to move forward.

Chapter 33

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason meets up with Shiao and discovers more distressing news.

Notes for the Chapter:

As promised, a new chapter before the weekend! WOW! So many wonderful comments. Thank you so, so much for sticking with me, my friends and for your reviews. It means the world to me. Incidentally, I am in the process of writing a boy's love novel. If anyone would be interested in getting a free copy in favour for a review on Amazon, once it is up, please send me an email animefaemoon at gmail.com. Please do not respond for this in the comments, as I will need your email to add to the list and it's not a good idea to leave personal info in there. :-)

“I’m a good pilot!” Riki insisted from beside Iason as the Blondie guided the ship Katze had solicited for him towards the moons orbiting the planet of Amoï. “I can fly bikes, cars, anything!”

“A ship is very different from either of those, Riki.”

“Oh come on! I’ve been on a ship a few times now and I’ve never gotten to fly one!”

“I will teach you to fly another time, Riki. Now, I will hear no more on the matter.”

Riki crossed his arms over his chest petulantly, then suddenly stood up from the co-pilot’s seat. “Fine! I won’t sit with you and keep you company then!”

“As you are being more irritant than company, that is an excellent idea.”

Riki glowered at Iason, then smirked and slid his arms around his shoulders. “I’m not always irritating.” His hand moved towards Iason’s groin and was startled when it was slapped away.

“Not while I am flying, Riki.”

“Grumpy ass.” Riki pulled away made a face behind Iason’s back and stalked down the three steps to the passenger area.

Carrie was seated on one of the wide bench seats against the left wall, while the Dakfure whom they learned was named Ran’talgis, slowly inched his way towards her, moving from seat to seat. Whenever he got too close, Carrie growled and he would back off.

Riki dropped down beside her, put his head on her shoulder in a very rare move of affection. “Iason’s being mean to me.”

Carrie patted his head. “Poor baby. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Be nice to me.”

“I’m always nice to you.” Carrie caught his hand, held it to his mouth. “Here suck your thumb if you’re going to sulk.”

“I prefer to suck on bigger things.”

“Riki!”

His comment had the desired reaction and Carrie grinned for the first time since learning she was no longer part of an extinct species. It brought some colour to her impossibly pale cheeks at least.

“I can demonstrate if you want?” His hand slid across her leg and she slapped at him, knowing he was only playing. She had found her bag of essentials and had changed into slacks and a short tunic, but she still wore Iason’s coat as it was cool in space.

“If you expect to find something *bigger* down there, you need to read up on women, Riki.”

“You could teach me.”

“Stop it, before you get me in trouble with your husband.”

Riki squirmed in his seat, both thrilled and embarrassed with the term, but he was determined to lighten her mood. He started stroking her back.

“Now what are you doing?”

“Petting you. Soft kitty, warm kitty...”

She laughed in both outrage and amusement. “You brat.” She gave him a quick hug, then just kept her head on his shoulder for a minute longer and sighed as her eyes settled on their guest across the room, she’d almost forgotten about him and felt the cold bleakness return almost immediately. Trying not to show it, she called to Iason.

“Riki is flirting with me, Iason!”

“Riki!” Iason warned, from the cockpit in a tone the mongrel had learned to obey, even as Riki shushed Carrie and grinned.

“You trying to get me killed?”

“Same goes,” she retorted, knowing Iason’s penchant for jealousy when it came to Riki, although she was reasonably sure the Blondie knew they were only teasing each other. She continued in a whisper. “You can distract him with sex to avoid punishment. I don’t have that option.”

“Yeah.” Riki grinned again, his gaze settling on the Dakfure who had finally settled on opposite bench. They had learned his name was Ran’talgis
“So, what’s your deal?”

“Deal?” he asked, confused. “I do not understand.”

“Why are you here? Why’d you attack Carrie like that?”

“Not attack. No harm was intended. Wish to go home only. Take her home.”

“She was home. *You* tried to kidnap her.”

“No.” The Dakfure tried to catch Carrie’s eye but she wouldn’t look at him. The exchange he had witnessed between the pair had confused him. Were they mates? “We are your tribe. You’re pride.”

She looked at him then and her icy gaze caused him to flinch. “*My* tribe were massacred decades ago,” she told him venomously. “I don’t know you, and my pride is here.” She touched Riki’s arm, then pointed towards the cockpit. “And there. They are my pride. You are nothing to me.”

“They are not Dakfure!”

“Neither am I! I’m only half, or haven’t you noticed that I am part Human?”

“In part or in whole you belong with us. We are so few, we cannot abandon those who are left.”

“I was abandoned years ago and I’m doing just fine. Go back to your people and tell them I’m not interested in joining up.”

In truth, Carrie was still trying to come to terms with the idea that there were more Dakfure out there. She wanted to ask how many were left? Where did they live? How had they survived all this time, but she knew if she asked those questions it would be opening a door she was determined to keep closed.

She had been part of a tribe once, had mourned their loss and avenged their deaths, but her life with them had not been ideal. She had been no more than a responsibility, an object of pity. As a child, she had been brought up as Dakfure, but being unable to control her Human side her upbringing also brought condemnation and ridicule from those professing to be her family.

As a Human, she was forbidden from certain Dakfurian rituals and rites of passage, yet as a Dakfure she was still hunted and sought. The Dakfure did

not accept her because she was Human, and the Humans hunted her because she was Dakfure.

Still, they had been all that she had, until she had been adopted by that Human family. But even they had not fully accepted her, and once her Dakfurian side brought trouble, thanks to that bastard she had almost married, they too abandoned her. There had never been a safe place for her, a solid home she could return to or anyone she could count on; until she moved to Tanagura and met Riki and Iason. They had given her more acceptance, more support and more love than all the decades before.

“Why do you deny who you are?” Ran’talgis asked, sadly.

Carrie glanced at him. “I know exactly who I am, which is why I know I won’t fit into your world. Just go back and tell them you couldn’t find me.”

“That would be a lie. Our Chief wishes you to come home.” He rose and took three steps towards her then went down on one knee. “I vow to return you to this place, if here is truly what you feel is home, if you will only come with me and see the others that are like you.”

“You have other half breeds?”

“I do not know this term, but we have others that are not pure.” Seeing her eyes widen in surprise he continued. “We were but a handful in the beginning, no more than thirty strong, and only four females escaped with us.”

“So, everyone is related now?” She asked bitterly, recalling the methods of her own tribe where it was open season on the few females that had been left. “You just want me to come back to become a brood mare?”

Again, he frowned. “This term also is unknown.”

“You want her to go back so you can have turns fucking her until she makes you lots of babies,” Riki explained crudely.

“No! No,” he insisted and reached for her, only to have Riki grab his wrist before he could make contact.

“Hands off, furball.”

“We are all a tribe, with many prides. Our leader chose not to overtax the women with breeding duties, and so he allowed some of us to find other mates, when there was the opportunity.” He lowered his eyes, uncomfortable to discuss what had been very dark times for them. “The young ones were few, many died before their first year.”

It sounded so much like what had been done to bring Carrie into the world that she felt her stomach clench. “And the women?” she demanded? “Did they die or did you just dispose of them afterwards?”

His head reared up in shock. “Dispose? Do you speak of murder?” When she nodded grimly his expression softened and he reached for her again, but she pulled her hands back against her stomach. “Was that the way of it with your tribe?”

“Some women volunteered, some were just taken. Most didn’t want to be impregnated but had no choice. They were kept in cages or tied to posts to prevent escape. In the end, all but one of the children died, and most of the mothers. Those women who did survive the birth were...” Carrie wet her lips, remembering what she had been learned about the time before her own birth. “The experiment was a complete failure and the women were thrown away and forgotten about.”

Ran’talgis, shook his head. “How cruel. That is not our way. Our women were taken as willing mates, many of them live still with our tribe.”

“Freely?” Carrie demanded. “Can they leave if they want to?”

“Why would they want to? They would not leave their pride, their home.”

“Do you have any Human offspring?”

“No. In that you would be unique, but it is not for us to judge you in such a way. Will you not come and meet with our Chief? He can explain better than I and you will see...”

“Just leave her alone,” Riki ordered suddenly, seeing that Carrie was getting upset. “Just go sit down and leave her alone.”

The Dakfure nodded and rose to his feet, but instead of returning to his seat he moved up into the cockpit. “If you will allow, I will signal them.” He told Iason as they approached the first moon. “They will fire on you otherwise.”

Iason nodded. “If you try anything, I will break your neck and toss you into space.”

Ran’talgis, nodded, wondered why this one was so unlike the dark one that had been their friend for so many years. He sat down in the co-pilots chair to send the message.

A few minutes later they received a reply, but it wasn’t, Iason noticed, from Shiao. It was a red skinned being who Iason recognized as a Bragini.

“Come up alongside, we will prepare the transfer tunnel.”

“Who is that?” Iason demanded.

“He flies with The Dark One.” The Dakfure advised and gave Iason the exact coordinates for Shiao’s ship. They were no longer behind the second moon, but had moved further out into space to avoid detection.

Iason saw the large freighter ahead of them and started to slow. He pulled up a respectable distance, then felt the jolt of a tractor beam securing their ship. Setting the autopilot, he also inputted a selection of instructions if he was not back on the ship within two hours, then moved to the tunnel hatch.

“Would you stay here, Carrie?” Iason asked her as he checked the door controls to ensure the tunnel generated from the freighter was secured and sealed against their own.

“Of course,” she assured. “Will you be long?”

Iason almost smiled, pleased she understood what he was asking. “Two hours.”

“Be careful,” she said with a nod.

“I will also stay,” The Dakfure decided, but Iason was already opening the sealed door and shoving him towards it.

“No.” Iason stepped out into space, and then thin red energy field that ran from their ship to the one opposite. “Riki, you stay too.”

“Not likely,” Riki returned and stepped out to follow. “You go, I go.”

Iason tried not to sigh as he watched his beloved follow the Dakfure across, impressed that the mongrel was not more nervous than only the thin field barrier lay between them and the vacuum of space.

He turned back to Carrie. “If you do not hear from us in two hours, enter the code 5567 into the pilot controls. The ship will handle the rest.” She nodded and was surprised when he slid a gloved finger down her cheek and then caught her chin to lift her gaze to his again. “I will not allow anyone to take you away. Do you believe me?”

She tried to swallow around the ball of emotion that rose in her throat and again nodded.

“Good.” He patted her head. “And for the record, you could absolutely distract me to avoid punishment, but we won’t tell Riki that.”

She gaped at him, flushed and then started to laugh as she watched them walk across to the freighter. “Freaking bat ears,” she muttered, waiting until they were safely inside before she closed and sealed the door on her end, then moved into the cockpit.

Shiao met them on the other side and he held his hand out to Iason as the Blondie stepped into the lower decks of the freighter and the door was sealed shut behind him.

“It is good to see you,” he said, showing none of the relief he had felt when Ran’talgis had informed his co-pilot that Iason Mink was on the ship. When they had arrived and heard that Iason had been attacked he had been greatly concerned if he might ever see the Blondie again.

Iason shook Shiao’s hand briefly. “It seems we have some things to discuss.”

“Yes.” Shiao glanced at Riki, offered his hand. “Hello Riki, you are looking well.”

“Thanks.” Riki had forgotten that the Onyx was not like other Elites and shook hands. His eyes scanned the docking area and Shiao picked up on it, immediately.

“He is here,” Shiao advised as they started walking across the docking bay. “He will be happy to see you.”

Riki glanced at Iason who’s lips thinned irritably.

“Ran’talgis, did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes, Fel’yshi,” the Dakfure advised quietly, referring to Shiao by his tribal name, as he followed behind. “She is unwilling to return with me.”

“Wait,” Riki grabbed Shiao’s arm as they entered a lift that would bring them to the upper levels. “*You* told them about Carrie?”

“She came up in conversation,” Shiao would accept the blame for this matter, as Guy had enough issues with this pair. “I was unsure as to if she was of the same species, as she also appears Human at times.”

“How do you know these creatures?” Iason demanded as the lift stopped and the Dakfure slunk off, before the car resumed its ride up.

“That is a long story, and one we do not have time for.” Shiao stepped out onto the bridge and watched Guy pop up from his chair and shuffle on his feet, nervously.

“H...hi, Riki...”

Riki didn’t know if the surge of warmth and relief that rose up inside of him was from his new unlocked emotions, or just because he had actually missed his old friend, but before he could decide he was striding across and throwing his arms around Guy.

“Uh...hey,” Guy glanced at Iason and Shiao, shocked. When they had parted, he certainly hadn’t expected such a greeting from Riki. “Good... good to see you.”

Riki held Guy for a minute longer to appreciate that the love he felt for his old friend was nowhere close to what he felt for Iason, but it was still there and so he could admit to it now. He could also fully forgive Guy for what happened in the past.

“Yeah,” he said pulling back and grinning. “Miss me, asshole?”

Guy grinned, thrilled to have Riki insulting him like old times. “Like I’d miss a bad tooth, dickhead.”

“Riki.” Iason dropped his hand on his mate’s shoulder and firmly pulled him away from Guy.

Riki felt a flash of resentment, but as he lifted his gaze to the Blondie, his heart was filled with more love. He could tell now when Iason was jealous or sulking, and he kinda liked it. He grabbed the Blondie by the shirt front and hauled him down for a brief kiss. “You’re so cute.”

“Riki,” Iason said again, but in a much softer tone. If they had been alone he would have thrown the mongrel to the floor and ravished him.

Both Guy and Shiao exchanged a quiet look of disbelief at how easily Riki had managed to soothe the savage beast; Iason’s expression was one neither of them would have believed a Blondie capable of.

Reluctantly, Iason pulled his gaze away from his beloved and directed it at Shiao, his Blondie exterior fully intact once more. “I wish to link with you

again.”

Shiao lifted an eyebrow. “Why?”

“To ascertain the truth.”

“You could just ask him,” Guy grumbled then shut up and sat down in one of the wide, swinging chairs when Iason glowered at him. “Just a thought.”

“It will be quicker and easier if we link, to allow no opportunity for deception.”

Shiao tilted his head. “You assume I will deceive you?”

“I assume everyone attempts to, but I *will* know the truth.”

“I will tell it. I have no need for falsehoods, Iason.”

“How can I believe that when you appear to be in the middle of this trouble?”

“What trouble is that?” Shiao returned mildly.

“You already know, or you wouldn’t be here,” Riki retorted. “Just do what Iason wants so he doesn’t have to kill you.”

“What are you, his agent?” Guy snapped, annoyed at Riki’s attitude.

“Perhaps we could discuss this in private?” Iason suggested, pointedly to Shiao, before he gave into the urge to shove Guy out the nearest airlock.

“Nope,” Riki returned easily, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m not letting you out of my sight, so just say what you have to say.”

“If he stays, I’m staying!” Guy insisted, rising.

Shiao shook his head at the two mongrels then returned his attention to the Blondie before him. “I cannot link with you, again, Iason. It is too dangerous.”

“I am willing to accept the danger.”

“I am not. I do not speak of a danger to either of us, but the danger of Jupiter learning that we have shared minds. There is something happening and I believe that She is behind it.”

“What do you suspect?”

Shiao smiled slowly at Iason’s tactic. “Do you mean to ask if I am aware, or in some way responsible for your...trouble?”

Iason stepped closer to Shiao. “You will tell me what you know, Onyx.”

When Guy started forward Shiao simply waved him back. “I *will* tell you what I know, Iason, but not because you command it.”

“I am a Blondie of Tanagura...”

“Yes, and you have no authority over me, *Blondie*.”

Guy and Riki watched with a moment of apprehension as the two Elites faced off against each other. Shiao was bigger, taller than Iason, but Iason was meaner and more advanced. It was a toss up of who would win in a fight between the pair.

“Who wants pudding?”

Everyone looked at Guy, who was already moving towards the Captain’s quarters, just left of the bridge. “Can’t have a meeting about the end of the world without pudding.” He stepped inside and quickly programmed four bowls, which slid out of the slot on a small tray. He carried it over to the corner table. “Well, come on. May as well eat while we can.”

Shiao smirked, glanced at Iason then stepped back and moved around the Blondie to join Guy in the room. “A fine idea, Guy. Pudding is brain food.”

“I thought that was fish?” Riki muttered to Iason as they both reluctantly stepped into the room and the door closed, shutting them off from the

bridge. They settled opposite Shiao and Guy and Riki accepted the bowl of pudding, tasted it. He shrugged. It was actually pretty good.

Iason watched the Onyx and mongrel opposite him dig into the pudding, and ignored the bowl set next to him. “I would have the truth.”

“We would all have the truth, but not all of us can handle such things.”

“Do you dare mock me?”

“No, Iason. I am not mocking you.” Shiao took two more bites of pudding, then set the bowl down. “You are angry, as am I. You are confused, I am...” He searched for the proper word that would best get his feelings across to the Blondie. “Terrified.”

Iason blinked, startled. “An Elite has no need to feel fear,” he said, despite having felt such things several times, because of Riki.

“No, they do not, however I am not an Elite. I am a creation of Jupiter, yet I am so far removed from what you are, Iason, that we might be different species.”

“What do you mean? You are an Onyx. You have the same basic functions as the current Onyx, do you not?”

“Yes.” Shiao dipped his spoon into his pudding, lifted it to his mouth and let it melt against his tongue. “And no.”

Iason slammed his hand on the table. “No more riddles. Tell me what you know. Are you responsible for what is happening to the other Blondies?”

“No.”

Iason’s eyes narrowed. “Yet you are aware of our situation?”

“I have a few people who keep me informed of what is happening on Amoï.”

“Spies,” Riki shot as he licked the last of the pudding off his spoon.

“As you like.”

Iason scowled. “And what have your spies been telling you?”

“That the Blondies and several other Elites have been behaving erratically for several weeks.”

“Is that why you are here? To take advantage of our current state and infiltrate Jupiter’s tower?”

For a moment, Shiao actually looked stunned at the suggestion. “You believe I have come here to destroy Jupiter?”

“It is the most logical reason. She destroyed your race, it would be natural to want revenge.”

Shiao stared at Iason. “I have never wished such a thing.”

“You lie.”

“It is your choice whether or not you believe me, however I have never once contemplated avenging the Onyx by destroying Jupiter.” He paused again, swirled the pudding in his bowl, but he did not lift it to his mouth. “I am no longer connected to Jupiter, and yet, based on the reports that I have received...”

“Go on,” Iason insisted, willing to give the Onyx the benefit of the doubt if it would get him to the bottom of things.

“It feels very much like the time just before Jupiter decided to destroy the Onyx. Like your brothers, I too had become confused, was hearing voices, sounds that I could not find origins for. It drove me to do...” Shiao lowered his eyes and felt a hand squeeze his arm. He lifted his grateful gaze to his companion’s before turning it back to Iason. “I did unspeakable things. While this feeling, whatever it is, does feel familiar, it also feels very different, and very dangerous.”

“You think Jupiter is going to destroy the Blondies?” Riki asked suddenly. “She would never do that! Especially Iason, he’s her favourite.”

“A favorite?” Shiao nodded passively but internally he grieved, for he too had once been Jupiter’s favourite. “Jupiter does not feel in the manner She has provided for us. She may speak of such things, may at times even seem affectionate, but it is a lie. She cannot experience true emotions and I believe it is because of this that She has no true connection to anything; not even Her own creations.”

Had Jupiter not wiped out thousands of the Onyx because She had believed them flawed? Had She given no real thought to who or what She had created, or Her reasons for creating them, before callously destroying them in favour of something slightly better?

“Perhaps,” Iason agreed quietly. “I have sensed a withdrawal from Her since dealing with the situation with Orphe. I believed it was due to Her displeasure at Orphe’s death or...”

“Or because of me?” Riki asked.

“Possibly, in part, some of Her withdrawal may be due to that. I was never quite comfortable with your sessions with Her, Riki. I never understood why they were necessary. She had never spoken to a Human telepathically and no Humans had ever been permitted inside Jupiter’s tower.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What could I say? I could not refuse Her, Riki, it would only cause more trouble for both of us.”

“What did you do during these sessions, Riki?” Shiao inquired.

Riki glanced at Iason, who nodded, then he shrugged. “We just talked, mostly. She said She was trying to open my mind, my memories to help me find where I came from. She asked a lot of weird questions, and I didn’t like the mind probe, but once I woke up it was okay.”

“Woke up?” Iason asked suddenly and caught Riki by the shoulders. “Were you unconscious while you were with Jupiter?”

“Well, yeah. Just after, because of the whole telepathy thing. She always made me lay down for awhile before I went back to the condo, said She was worried about me passing out or something on the way. It did make the headaches better.”

“That doesn’t sound suspicious at all,” Guy muttered.

“Riki,” Iason said quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I didn’t think it was important. You saw how tired I was when I came back from those sessions, Iason. It would have been a lot worse if She hadn’t made me take a nap first.”

“I should have pushed for details. I should have suspected...” Iason shook his head. “I foolishly believed that when She changed your status it was because She finally accepted our relationship.”

“And now?” Shiao asked. “Do you still believe that was Her reasoning?”

“No. She had another reason for seeing Riki, a reason I do not yet know and based on recent events, I now suspect that She changed his status, not as a reward, but a punishment, to further ostracize me from the other Blondies, and to anger them.”

“Enough to push them into a revolt.” Shiao lowered his head. “It is the same. This was how She orchestrated our extermination. She managed to turn us against each other, and then ourselves. I do not know what Her original motive was, but She must have realized that She needed proof that we were unstable enough to justify Her position.”

“Why?” Guy asked. “She’s Jupiter, everyone knows that Jupiter can do what She wants.”

“That is true, however part of Her programming was instilled by Humans. She still has that ingrained trait that Her actions must be morally justified, not to people, you are right that She does not care about them, but to Herself. She is the supreme being, yet She is compelled to uphold her most basic programming.”

Guy frowned. “So, you’re saying She’s creating all this trouble because She had an attack of conscience?”

“I would not put it in such Human terms, but it is a similar reasoning.”

“What can we do?” he asked, touching Shiao’s arm and missing the narrowed look that Iason gave them. “She can’t reach you while you’re this close, right? You said before that your death switch was removed as payment for helping with Her special project, right? So, you’re safe?”

“What special project?” Iason demanded.

Shiao’s large hand reached up and covered Guy’s, but he caught Iason’s suspicious look both times and choose to ignore it. “It was not a death switch, Guy.”

“She used it to kill off the other Onyx.”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s a death switch!”

“As you like.” Shiao squeezed Guy’s hand.

“But, why would She suddenly want to destroy the Blondies?” Riki asked. “They run everything, doesn’t She need them?”

“Perhaps not,” Iason murmured and everyone’s attention turned to him, expectantly. If what Shiao said was true, and he sensed that it was, things were falling into place and it was not a place he wanted to be in. “I sensed a change in Her recently, one that I did not give much thought to at first, but the more often I noticed changes in Her behavior, the more curious I became, so I attempted to breach Her inner wall.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Shiao bolted up from his chair, startling the two mongrels. “That is the key to Her central programming. She would view such a violation as an attempt to murder Her!”

“I was aware of the risks,” Iason stated, darkly as he also rose. “I was also aware that something had been off with Jupiter for some time and no one else seemed to be concerned with it. I was trying to ascertain the problem, to help Her, not to harm Her.”

“She may not have seen it that way,” Guy whistled low. “And She may not forgive you for it either.”

“I do not think the recent issues are due to my interference in this matter. Jupiter was acting strangely before that. There must be a flaw in Her programming that is causing this irrationally.”

“She is not capable of acting irrationally.” Shiao denied. “She bases all Her decisions on facts and figures.”

“And predictable, emotional responses.”

The trio looked down at Riki’s quiet statement.

“Why do you say that?” Iason asked.

“When She had me in Her chamber or whatever, and when She got inside my head, She seemed to be trying really hard to understand what I was feeling. I mean it was creepy how She wanted me to share everything with Her and when I wouldn’t She’d either get angry or try to manipulate me by showing me things She assumed I would like.”

“Like what?” Guy sat forward across the table as Iason and Shiao returned to their seats.

Riki shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable with talking about it. “She’d make Herself look more Human, more feminine. She’d try and get me to do things that...” He shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Tell me,” Iason encouraged, reaching for his hand.

“Well, I didn’t really remember my mother, I still don’t, it’s just fragments. Anyway, I don’t have any clue what they do or how they are, but I got the weird feeling that She was trying to, I don’t know, act like a mother, and...”

“Go on.”

“Well, My mo...I mean, the Queen said that when Jupiter first got to Avalon and demanded our release, the Queen refused and said that she was my mother. That apparently really, really pissed off Jupiter.”

Iason scowled. “But why?” Why would Jupiter think of Riki in such a way when She had warned him against keeping Riki as a pet for so many years? While She often referred to the Elites as Her children, Shiao had been correct in that She was incapable of feeling true love or hate or any strong emotion. “She is incapable of such feelings, Riki.”

“I didn’t say it was what She was feeling I just said it seemed like it.”

“Perhaps Her mind has finally started to fail?”

“Her mind cannot fail,” Iason refused. “She is Jupiter. She has back-up systems hidden in hundreds of locations across Amoï.”

“I was not speaking of Her cybernetic persona, Iason.” Shiao met and held Iason’s gaze. He had to know, had to be privy to that side of Jupiter. As her favoured son there was no one else She would have relied on to know Her darkest secret.

Iason sat back, his face pulling into a blank mask. “I admit, I had not considered that possibility.”

“What possibility?” Guy demanded. “What are you talking about?”

“Something that must not be spoken of.” Iason rose suddenly. “I will have to check...”

Shiao also rose and grabbed Iason’s arm. “You cannot go back, Iason.”

“I must. She will not know that you are here, Shiao, that we spoke or why, and even if She were to learn why, I will simply tell Her...”

“It will get worse.”

Iason stopped talking but now Riki rose.

“What will?” he demanded. “What will get worse? His memory loss? The attempts on his life?”

“You’ve had memory loss?” Shiao’s eyes flickered and for a moment he looked...panicked? Then his normal, calm expression returned. “Are you missing time, Iason?”

“It is irrelevant...”

“It is extremely relevant. All of it will get significantly worse if you return. As long as you are close enough for Her to touch your mind, it will continue to degrade your own.”

“Fuck that!” Riki said and turned to Iason. “We’ll go somewhere else. I hated it there anyway, let’s just go far away and...”

“I cannot.” Iason reached down and caressed his cheek, tenderly. “It is not just me this is happening to, Riki. Whether She is doing it deliberately or unintentionally, we will all start to go mad. All of us, the Blondies, the Emeralds, the Ruby’s. We will go mad and everyone will die. Every species on Amoï will die.”

Riki’s eyes widened in horror.

“That’s not possible?” Guy insisted, bolting to his feet. “How could...”

“The Elites are what keep Tanagura going, it is the main city of Amoï. They are involved in trade, revenue, energy, housing and food. There is no part of Amoï that they do not and cannot touch, no industry that is not under their command.”

“If they start to go mad, all of it will shut down,” Riki realized. “The shops, the energy fields, the power grids, the water purifiers will all shut down and no one will be able to get them up again because only the Elite’s know how.”

“But Jupiter controls everything! She wouldn’t let it be shut down!”

Riki looked up at Iason and saw the truth. “She would. She would, because like he said, She has back-ups everywhere. She can run and hide until She’s developed another new prototype to serve Her.”

“Yes,” Shiao admitted quietly, for he had seen this carnage one before, with the Onyx. “Amoï is a desert planet. If the water purifiers and crop simulators fail there will be no food and no water. If the energy fields that surround Amoï come to a stop, the sun will blast through the atmosphere and roast everything left alive on the planet.”

“Holy fuck.” Guy slowly sat back down.

He had not known that Amoï was so dependent on the Elites and Jupiter. He had always looked at it as a toleration regime of machines and androids whose sole purpose was to keep Humans in slums like Ceres. He had no idea that their technology was what actually sustained life on the planet. He never knew there was even an energy field around the planet or why it would be needed!

“What can we do?” Riki asked Iason, then looked at Shiao. “Can’t you help him at all?”

Shiao looked at the three people staring at him and closed his eyes. He could not have predicted things would come to such an end. He had so been enjoying his life with Guy after so many centuries of loneliness and monotony.

“Shiao?” Guy put his hand on the Onyx’s arm. “We can’t let them go back to die. We just can’t.”

“Not even me?” Iason tossed.

“No, because Riki loves you and he’d be lost without you.” When Iason and Riki blinked in surprise, Guy continued. “I said I get it, I told you last time. Didn’t you think I meant it? I know you guys have to be together, are meant to be.”

Proud of Guy for putting himself on the spot and admitting the truth, Shiao opened his eyes again. “There is one thing I can do, but it may put you in even more danger than just returning as you are.”

“What is it?” Iason asked. “Let me choose for myself at least.”

“I can sever your connection to Jupiter.”

Iason actually stumbled backwards and fell into the chair as it hit the back of his knees. Riki immediately moved to put an arm around him.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“That is impossible,” Iason whispered. “I cannot break with Jupiter! That is impossible!” Iason wasn’t sure why his voice had risen with his last words, or why he suddenly felt a very real fear curl through him. Jupiter was his creator, *The* creator. Without Her he would be nothing. Without Her there was nothing.

“It will be difficult,” Shiao admitted, watching Iason closely and understanding his reaction because he had already gone through the trauma of detachment. “But it is not impossible. I am no longer connected to Jupiter in anyway. She cannot sense me, even if I were inside Her chamber, unless Her screens showed that I was there She would never know.”

Iason looked at Guy, accusingly. “Is this what you meant by a kill switch?” His gaze turned back to Shiao. “Jupiter allowed you to forever disconnect from Her?”

“She did.”

“Why? Why would you wish to do that? Why would She let you?”

“She had eradicated all others like me, Iason. I managed to flee the system and thus Her reach for over a century, but then someone found me and reported to Her. She had been looking for me, had needed me for a special project of Hers and She offered me anything I wanted to help Her.”

“And you asked to be disconnected?”

“I did.”

“What was this project? What could possibly be so important that She would allow...”

“You.” Shiao replied simply and watched Iason’s eyes narrow, then grow wide. The Blondie was angry, but he noticed that Iason’s eyes remained the ice cold blue and did not flash to red as they normally would. Curious, he thought.

“Liar.”

“He’s not lying!” Guy insisted. “He’s your fucking Father, dude! Deal it!”

“My...No. That...I do not understand this! Why?”

“She had already created the other Elites,” Shiao stated. “As well as the other Blondies, but she felt that all of them was still lacking in something. Her attempt to create the perfect being, the perfect hybrid of cybernetic and organic materials had failed.”

“So, you’re saying that Jupiter asked you to help create...” Riki swallowed hard. “Iason?”

“Yes, and despite giving me Her word that I was free to go and that She would never seek me out again, agents of Jupiter have been doing just that recently, which is why we moved from our former location.”

“What do you believe Jupiter wants with you now?” Iason demanded, trying to digest all this new, and alarming information.

“I believe it...”

“Shi?”

Shiao moved to the communications console at the Captain’s desk and the Bragini, his occasional co-pilot appeared on screen. He had known the red-skinned creature for four decades and was one of the few hominoids he

could trust. Re was a good pilot, but the genderless alien had an odd habit of shortening Shiao's name.

"What is it?"

"You might want to hear this. It's a broadcast alert from Tanagura."

"Put it on the main screen," Shiao ordered and stepped out onto the bridge again, followed by the others.

On the ships forward view screen, a droid stood in front of the gates of Eos and appeared to be in the middle of his news story. "We repeat, a warrant has been issued for the Blondie Gideon Lagnat for the murder of his brother and fellow Blondie Raoul Am." A picture of Raoul appeared, then was replaced with one of Gideon. "If you see this Blondie, Gideon Lagnat, do not approach. Call the Authorities at the number below. Lagnat is believed to be extremely dangerous. Again, do not approach, call the number below and authorities will be dispatched to your location."

The droid continued to repeat the alert, but Shiao waved his hand and his co-pilot shut off the sound. He turned to the others, saw that Iason was staring at the screen, his expression completely blank.

"Iason?"

"A lie." Iason took a step back. "Why would they report such a lie?"

"I do not believe it is a lie, Iason. Jupiter is very particular about what gets reported. She would not allow it if it were not the truth."

Iason shook his head. This had to be a lie. Raoul could not die. He *must* not...Raoul. His brother, his friend. No. No! That Gideon could do this..."He will die."

Shiao and Riki surged forward as the angry Blondie suddenly rose and surged forward.

"Gideon will die for this. I will kill him myself!"

“Iason, calm down!” Riki insisted, as he tried to sooth his enraged mate. He had never liked Raoul, but it was also hard for him to believe that the Blondie who had been a constant irritation to him was gone forever.

“Iason, this won’t help.” Shiao moved in front of them.

“Help? I do not care for your help. I will find Gideon and I will *kill* him. Move! I need my ship!. Move now!”

“This will solve nothing, Iason,” Shiao countered and grabbed Iason by the shoulders, holding the Blondie back took every ounce of his strength. “If you go back there now Jupiter will find you instantly. You are walking right into Her hands!”

“You will remove your arms from me, Onyx, or I shall rip them off of you!” Iason felt a pain in his chest again and grimaced. It increased and he put his hand over it, thinking it might ease the pain, but it didn’t it only became worse. There was a strange pounding in his ears, a foreign thumping in his chest. “What...what is this?”

Shiao scowled and slid his hand down from Iason’s shoulders to cover Iason’s fingers against the Blondie’s chest. His eyes widened. “No,” he whispered. “She could not have found another.”

“Another what?” Riki demanded anxiously as the fight went out of Iason and he stumbled back into the chair again. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“My...chest.” Iason winced again. “It feels strange. What is happening to me?”

Shiao regarded him quietly for a long, hard moment, then he shook his head. “Damn.” He stalked away to the back of the ship.

“Iason?” Riki kneeled beside the Blondie. “What is it? Where does it hurt?”

“Here.” Iason squeezed his hand over his chest. “It is...very uncomfortable.”

Riki slid his arms around Iason and hugged him close, leaning his head to the Blondie's chest, and upon hearing the rapid thudding inside of it, he scrambled back. "W...what the hell?"

Shaio returned and caught Iason's chin. "Open," he demanded and the Blondie could not disobey. Shiao placed some sort of tablet beneath Iason's tongue. "Let it dissolve. The pain will dissipate."

"He...he..." Riki stammered unable to complete the sentence for the reality of it was unfathomable.

"Yes," Shiao replied grimly. "Iason has a Human heart."

"That..." Iason began and winced once more, but he could feel the pain in his chest easing. "That is not possible."

"I am afraid it is very possible. I suspected that Jupiter was looking for me again because She wished to use my heart for you."

Guy gaped at the Onyx. "You...you have a heart A Human heart?"

"Yes. It was specially modified for my cybernetic system. It and my brain are the only organic parts I have."

"I...where?" Iason could feel the pounding in his ears lesson, and the pain in his chest eased. "I did not have this...before." He had seen the test results from his scan, had showed them to Raoul. Where had it come from? When had it been implanted?

"Before what?"

"The collapse! After the condo collapsed, two days ago. I had a full scan done. There were some organic oddities, but there was not a heart! How can this be?"

"Iason, Riki said earlier that you were missing time, is that true?"

Iason nodded. "Yes. I suspect I have had recent surgeries during those times and organic material had been placed inside of me." He paused lifted his

gaze to Shaio's. "Raoul suspected it was your doing."

"No." Shiao stepped back and in a rare show of agitation began to pace. "Jupiter would have needed to test your android form for organics, to ensure you did not reject it. They would have been small samples, placed at junction points throughout your body."

Iason shook his head. What Shiao was explaining was exactly what had been discovered. "Why?"

"She could not have placed the heart without confirming your body would accept it."

"It is not possible! I do not have a Human heart. It is something else, it must be!"

"It is simple enough to verify. Come." Shiao headed off the bridge quarters and moved into the lift, everyone followed, except the co-pilot.

They stepped out a moment later into a small medical bay. "Get on the table, Iason." Iason complied, wanting to prove the theory false. Shiao set up the scanners and enabled the equipment above the table. It swept over the Blondie's body quickly and efficiently and produced a 3-dimensional readout.

"There," Shiao pointed to the scan of Iason's chest cavity, where a visible human heart pumped slowly in and out. "A heart."

"Why would Jupiter give him a heart?" Guy asked, curious, then looked at Shiao. "Why do you have one?"

"Jupiter believes that a Human's strengths come from the depth of their emotions. She believes that it is the heart, not the mind that controls stronger emotions. In order to test Her theory, She gave a heart and a brain to myself and two other Onyx. The others were destroyed, but I survived. Perhaps She looks at that as validation for her theory."

“That is a really stupid theory,” Riki decided. “It makes no sense.”

“It does to Jupiter. She made several inquiries regarding my maintenance, including my heart, when we spoke on the ship after our rescue from Avalon. I believe She intended to use my heart to place into Iason and test Her theory again.”

“Why your heart?”

“It took several years to cultivate a Human heart that would survive inside an android body without the usual blood and vein traveling system that is found in Humans. The process was attempted on well over a thousand hearts, it took half a century to cultivate them properly and then it was only the three that adapted.”

“Uh...” Guy interjected, uneasily. “I have to ask, where did Jupiter get the hearts and brains from you guys anyway?”

“The brains were removed from a recently deceased body and re-stimulated to be placed into an android’s head cavity.”

“And the hearts?” Riki demanded. “You said there had been thousands tested.”

“From mongrels that were rounded up for experimentation.”

Guy wet his lips. “Dead ones?”

Shiao looked at Guy with a trace of sympathy. “No.”

Riki shrugged off the cold shiver that slid through his body and tried to swallow the rage that was growing inside of him. Jupiter had always been a pain in the ass for Mongrels because of Her need to control everything, but he had never considered the AI could be so monstrous.

“Mink said that Jupiter changed Riki’s status to piss off the other Blondies,” Guy continued, trying to come to terms with what he had just heard. Thousands. Thousands of mongrels had their hearts ripped out on an AI’s whim and only three had been kept. It was a horrifying thought. “That’s the

sign of someone who wants to cause trouble for him, so why be worried about implanting a heart to test a theory?" He turned to Riki. "What was your status changed to, anyway?"

Riki lowered his eyes, crossed his arms over his chest, oddly embarrassed at confessing such a thing to his old pairing partner. "Nothing, it doesn't matter."

Iason sat up from the med-table and swung his legs over the side. "This entire conversation is a waste of time. There must be a flaw with your equipment. I cannot have had a recent surgery as I have lost no time, therefore it would be impossible that the heart was transplanted into me in the last two days. I have data on every moment."

He proceeded to explain everything he had done and gave specific times during the day after the collapse, including his meeting with his brothers and Jupiter.

"It could have been placed there before, Iason."

"I tell you it was not! I had a scan done that very morning and verified that there was unknown organic material inside of me, material I could not discern the origin of, however there were absolutely no indications of full organic organs. A heart was not there."

"What did you do after you brought Riki to a safehouse?" Shiao asked.

"I had Katze contact Raoul and requested he meet me to discuss the results of my scan. After that I returned to my apartment in Apathia."

"You still have that?" Riki asked, startled, remembering that had been where Iason had allowed him to stay for a short while when he had been working for the Black Market dealer.

"Yes, it was a good investment and I saw no reason to sell."

"After that what did you do?" Shiao inquired.

“I arranged for a ship and some essentials. I had something to eat and slept for exactly, 4.5 hours until 05:45. I then went to our damaged condo and spent approximately an hour going through the rubble. I left there at exactly 07:15, then I went to pick up Riki.”

“How far was Riki? From where you were?”

“Approximately a two-hour drive and I remember each and every moment of it.”

“Uh...Iason?” Riki began, warily. “You didn’t get to the beach house until after dark.”

Iason blinked. “That...” He thought back and recalled that it had indeed been well past dusk when he had arrived. “No, that...” He remembered the two-hour drive. He had listened to some classical music and had been thinking about giving Riki his jacket. “I remember the time! It’s...”

“You’re missing ten hours from the time you left Tanagura to the time you arrived at the safe house,” Shiao stated grimly. “It would be just enough time for them to complete the surgery and allow for a recovery time, to ensure your body did not reject the heart.”

“This is not possible!” Iason’s chest again started to contract. “Damn it, why does it hurt so much?”

“It’s a side effect, I also went through similar discomfort initially, but my heart has fused with my other systems now. The capsule I gave you helps ease the pain, but I cannot give you another, not yet. You simply need to try and stay calm, Iason. I understand it is difficult, but right now the organ inside of you will react severely to stress.”

“Iason,” Riki touched the Blondie’s arm. “What if what he says is true? What if they really did put that in you?”

“Jupiter had you for those ten hours,” Shiao added. “She could have done anything to you, even read your mind.”

Guy scowled. “So, She’d know where we are now?”

“No, Iason did not know where we were until after he’d had the surgery.”

Riki paled. “He didn’t know where you were, but he knew where we were, me, Cal and Yielia.” He looked at Iason. “Which means Jupiter also knows. Iason...Cal...”

“No,” Iason decided, even as the idea of it worried into his brain. “I was there for several hours, Riki. If Jupiter was after me She could have taken me then.”

“She didn’t need to take you,” Shiao reminded. “She’d already done what She’d intended with the surgery.”

“If that is true, then She would have no further reason to harm us.” He looked at Riki. “Or those we care for.”

“That is not necessarily true,” Shiao returned. “She is obviously trying to separate you from the other Blondies, and while She may not have attacked you while you were there, there is nothing to say She will not reduce your avenues of support and escape.”

“We need to go,” Riki insisted. “We need to go now!”

“Riki...” Iason began, torn between what his logic and loyalty to his race, to Jupiter, and what Riki wanted.

Jupiter may be behind all of this, but he could not imagine She would willfully hurt Cal and Yielia just to isolate him. They were no one to Jupiter, and She was his creator after all. He glanced at Shiao, one of them anyway. Did he really contain parts of the Onyx? He was not at all sure how he felt about that.

“Bring your crew over,” Shiao instructed as he started for the elevator again. “Your ship will be known to Her if you purchased it before you went to the safe house.”

“Then that means She can trace it to us, right?” Guy demanded, worried.

“Possibly, but we won’t be here long enough to find out.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“We’ll take a shuttle down to find your friends, and rendezvous with Re at other coordinates.” He turned to Iason as they stepped into the lift. “You cannot let Jupiter in when we are back on the planet, Iason. If you cannot control Her access to your thoughts you will have to stay here.”

“I can control it,” Iason assured, stiffly. He’d had plenty of practice at blocking Jupiter from his mind, especially since he had met Riki. “And I will not allow you to go anywhere near my people without me present.”

Shiao nodded. “Then let’s get going.”

Chapter 34

Summary for the Chapter:

Someone breaks into katze's apartment and catches him unawares.

Notes for the Chapter:

I figured I'd add an early chapter for you as I may have to go out of town for a few days :-) Thanks so much for all the great reviews!

Katze's head was pounding when he opened his eyes and stared at the black porcelain vessel before him. "What?" he began as he slowly sat up from the hard tiled floor. Had he fallen asleep on the floor or worse, had he had a blacked out?

Pain shot up his leg as he moved his bad ankle, not fully awake and forgetting his injury. The pounding in his head seemed to multiply, but he realized that it was not only in his head but coming from somewhere outside of the bathroom. His apartment door? Probably that stupid paranoid idiot from the next floor up who was often at his door about someone else watching him or plotting to kill him.

Normally Katze would swallow his annoyance and listen to the guy rant and rave, because someone that paranoid noticed everything and could be a useful security tool. Today however, he was too tired, too angry and in too much pain to deal with it.

He groaned and deliberately lay back on the cool tiled floor, even as the pounding continued. Go away, he thought desperately and closed his eyes, hoping his erratic neighbor would believe he wasn't home and toddle off.

"Help!"

“Go away!” Katze screamed suddenly, beyond frustrated and in serious pain as he tried to rise, using only one leg. “God, sonofabitch...” Using the sink for leverage he pulled himself up and adjusted his clothing, no point meeting guy with his dick hanging out.

“Help! Katze!”

He splashed some water on his face, then grimaced at his own reflection. His hair was flat on one side from laying on the floor, his eyes sunken and shadowed and his skin nearly translucent.

“Get a grip,” he ordered himself then glanced down at the toilet to see something white around the seat. Fuck! He snatched a towel to wipe it off as he remembered what he had done and immediately stepped on his bad foot.

A cry ripped from him when his shoulder slammed off the sink on his way back to the floor just as a loud crash sounded. He was in too much pain to even contemplate how someone could have broken through his three-inch-thick security sealed door, but even as he gripped the sink and attempted to right himself again, a shadow moved over him.

“You!”

“Aww fuck!” Katze swore as he was swept up into the arms of a very angry looking Blondie and the sudden movement pulled at his injured foot. Katze’s anger, pain and embarrassment made him forget all about protocol and his fist shot out, connecting with Raoul Am’s face. “Why can’t you leave me alone? Leave me the fuck alone!”

Raoul remained silent as he strode out of the bathroom and down the hall to Katze’s spacious bedroom and wide king-sized bed. “Help!” he insisted as he dropped Katze on the bed unceremoniously, then started to crawl towards him.

“I don’t want your help!” Katze began to inch upwards towards the head of his bed, away from the advancing Elite with the blood red eyes. “I don’t

want you here. You can't keep coming here when I don't want you here, damn it!"

"Help, Katze." Raoul reached for him, then suddenly fell face first on the bed. It was then that Katze noticed the blackened strips of hair at the crown of Raoul's skull. Shit! The Blondie wasn't offering to help, he was asking for it. He sat up, reached for Raoul. "What happened? What's wrong?"

Raoul's vocal synthesizer was not functioning properly, he had to concentrate ninety percent of his brain function to form a single coherent word. When he had woken up on the floor of an unused storage area in the Third Tower, Gideon was gone and he could no longer sense Jupiter. His thoughts had been jumbled, the pain in his head excruciating.

He'd managed to get up the stairs and outside unnoticed, but his limbs were like iron, heavy, slow and sluggish. Somehow, he couldn't quite remember exactly, he'd gotten into a vehicle and gave it the only destination his scrambled mind could think of. Even after the vehicle pulled up outside Katze's Apathia apartment, Raoul was unsure how long he had remained inside the car. Minutes? Hours? Days? He couldn't adjust, couldn't discern a chronological order to anything, but then he was outside Katze's front door desperately hammering on it, needing to get to the one person he could trust.

"Raoul. Tell me what happened? Tell me what to do."

Raoul managed to roll over onto his back and stared up at the concern on Katze's face. Concern? For him? Why was Katze here? Where was here? A synaptic nerve seemed to fire in his brain and he winced. Pain. He was in pain, that was why he was here.

"Cut. Open." A gloved hand lifted, his hand? Patted the crown of his head where the singed hair lay. "Help."

Katze cursed, slid off the bed, ignoring the pain in his foot, and hopped over to his closet. He rummaged through for a small black box, then hopped back to the bed. He slid the box open and revealed a variety of illegal

weapons, including vibro blades, a laser gun and diamond edged laser knife.

He held each of the items up for Raoul to see, until the Blondie reached for the knife, but the gloved hand trembled in an attempt to hold it, so Katze took it back. “Tell me what to do.”

Raoul wished he could do just that, but he couldn’t communicate properly. “Incite.”

“Incite? You mean incision? Damn it, you want me to cut into your head? Are you crazy? I’m not a surgeon!”

“Must!” Raoul gripped Katze’s hand painfully. “Must...do.”

Katze managed, with difficulty because he was a heavy son of a bitch, to push Raoul back onto his stomach. Running his fingers across the Blondies hair to pull it out of the way he found the black patch at the scalp. “How deep?” Raoul held up two of his fingers in an approximation. “Okay, here goes.”

Katze flipped the switch on the knife and it started to glow blue from the energy of the laser. Very carefully he sliced into Raoul’s scalp, allowing only the tip of the blade to go through approximately two centimeters. Fear and nerves crawled up from his stomach and settled in his throat, but his hand remained steady.

“Okay, now what?”

Raoul drew a U shape on the bed covers.

Katze blew out a breath and carefully followed suit. He peeled back the piece of android scalp and stared down at the darkened mass beneath it. “This is gross.”

“What...see?”

“I see your brain, what else am I supposed to see?” When Raoul thumped his fist on the bed Katze grimaced and leaned closer. “One spot is darker

than the rest.”

“Slit?”

“No, I didn’t cut through, I was careful.”

“Slit?” Raoul growled in frustration as he wasn’t saying what he meant to say. “Tag?”

“I don’t understand what you...” Katze paused as he saw a glimmer of something shiny that seemed lodged in the soft tissue of his brain matter and just in front of it was a round, tiny black orb that was still smoldering. He described it to Raoul.

“Out.”

“You want me to take it out? Which one? What if I damage your brain more?”

“Dam...done. Out. Out!”

Katze rose again, grunted in pain and hobbled back into his bathroom. He returned a moment later with a small medical kit.

“This is probably going to hurt,” he told Raoul, unsure if Blondies experienced pain like humans, but Raoul sure as hell seemed to be in discomfort. And he remembered what Iason had gone through when he had been learning to walk.

Tearing off his belt, he placed it between the Blondie’s teeth, just in case, then collected a small patch of gauze and a pair of tweezers from the kit. Carefully he started to work the pieces of foreign material out of Raoul’s brain.

Raoul tensed in surprise and bit down on the belt then felt his system suddenly shutting down. When he opened his eyes again, Katze was leaning over him, shaking him and calling his name.

“Thank Jupiter!” Katze sighed when the Blondie opened his eyes with their usual, lovely shade of green. “I thought I’d killed you!”

It took Raoul a few moments to pull himself together and reconstruct what had happened. He quickly ran a diagnostic on his systems, and aside from a mild headache, everything appeared normal. He sat up quickly and wrapped his arms around the startled red-head, who had essentially saved his life.

“How long was I unconscious?” Raoul asked, without releasing Katze. It was a relief to be able to communicate properly again.

“Almost an hour, I was about to shock you, to see if it would wake you up.”

Raoul pulled back and saw the fear and worry in the man’s eyes. He was alive, he thought with an odd sense of wonder, yet he could feel a deep, nearly painful emptiness inside of him; the ache of no longer being connected to Jupiter? He looked past Katze to the piece of bloody gauze on the night table and the two tiny objects nestled upon it, then pulled Katze into his arms again.

“Hey!” Katze shoved at Raoul, awkwardly. “What the hell is going on?”

“The end,” Raoul said quietly. “Thank you, Katze.”

“What end? What happened to you? What were those things that I took out of you?”

Raoul released Katze and lifted his hand to his head. He could just barely feel the outer crust of where Katze had saudered the wound closed and cut away some of his hair. “May I have a drink?”

“Spot!” Katze wasn’t up to getting off the bed again, his entire leg was on fire from all the moving around he’d already had to do.

Raoul’s eyebrows rose as the little homemade droid entered the bedroom. “Is *that* your house droid?”

“It works,” Katze retorted. “A cup of coffee and a glass of wine, Spot.”

“Something stronger,” Raoul requested as he slid his legs to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. Something clanked to the floor and he reached down to pick up the belt that Katze had placed in his mouth; he had bitten clean through it.

“I didn’t think Elites could get drunk,” Katze muttered, then to the droid. “Get the ’48 Rylian,”

Spot rolled out of the room and Raoul’s gaze followed it, amused. He was relieved to be able to think and speak properly again, but he was still feeling very unsettled. Turning his attention back to Katze, he watched the black-market dealer wince as he tried to get into a more comfortable position on the bed.

“Allow me...” Raoul began and Katze shrugged him off. “I only wish to help you, as you have helped me.”

“I don’t need your help.”

He’d been so damn scared that the Blondie had died on him, so terrified of what they would do to him for killing an Elite that he’d only been able to think about getting Raoul to wake up again. When Raoul opened his eyes, the relief had poured through him, but then the Blondie had sat up and hugged him and Katze suddenly remembered why he was so pissed earlier and that he wasn’t the first the Blondie had held that day.

“Just drink your drink, take your...” He indicated the gauze on the nightstand. “Whatever the hell that is and go.”

Raoul stared at Katze confused. Why was the man suddenly so angry? “I thought we were friends? Why are you...?”

“We’re not friends. We never were. I just said that so you’d stop harassing me.”

Raoul ignored the spark of fury that rose inside him because he knew Katze was probably just in pain with his ankle and so not fully rational. He

reached for Katze's bad leg, only to have the young man kick out at him, then cry out in pain.

"That was foolish." Raoul caught Katze's leg and held it down so he could examine the swelling. "You need some ice."

"I *need* you to leave."

"After I get you some ice."

Katze sat up, grabbed the book on his nightstand and threw it at Raoul as the Blondie moved towards the door. Raoul turned and deflected the projectile easily then pounced on Katze, pinning him to the bed with as much effort as it took to comb his hair.

"Stop this!"

"Leave!"

"I will not leave until I have returned your kindness, now tell me why you are acting like this?"

"It's none of your business what I do or how I act. I *don't* belong to you. I didn't help you because of kindness, I did it because you're a Blondie and I'm trained to obey. Now get out of my house!"

"Katze, I am trying to help..." Raoul's eyes flashed red when Katze managed to pull his right hand free and took a swing at him. "Enough!" he warned as he pinned Katze again. "I demand you tell me what I have done to deserve such treatment from you."

Katze let his body go limp and turned his head to the side, ashamed of his own behavior but unable to answer Raoul's charge. He didn't know why he was acting this way. Never in his life had he ever behaved in such a manner and he had no clue why he was doing so now.

Earlier he had been angry at Raoul and he hadn't fully understood why. Seeing him with Gideon had caused a pit of nausea inside of him, and he hadn't a clue why. He felt angry and betrayed and because he couldn't

understand why he was having those feelings, it only made him angrier and more frustrated.

Then, Raoul had showed up hurt his door, which had shocked and confused him enough that he forgot his earlier rage. When he thought Raoul had died, there by his own hand, Katze had been beside himself. He didn't understand why he was feeling these things! There was no training he could fall back on to relieve himself of the thoughts he was having about Raoul. Anger at the Blondie one minute, fear for his life the next, then relief and back to anger. None of it made sense!

His abduction, the attack on Iason and Riki, the knowledge of what he had done in the bathroom earlier while thinking of Raoul, and the damned limited mobility of his foot, it was just too much. It was all too much to handle, even for him!

Everything was Raoul's fault. If Raoul hadn't been harassing him about friendship and some shit, if he hadn't been thinking of Raoul instead of paying attention at the drop, he wouldn't have been captured. If he hadn't been captured his foot wouldn't be such a mess and Raoul wouldn't have insisted on him going through stupid therapy in that stupid clinic! He would have been working like he always did with one ear to the ground and probably would have heard about the possible attack on the condo; maybe he could have even prevented it.

If Raoul hadn't answered the phone looking and sounding like sex he wouldn't have been thinking about the Blondie, worried that his trust had been betrayed, yet again, and certainly wouldn't have ended up passed out on his fucking bathroom floor! Then the damn Elite shows up, uninvited once again, and makes him cut into his brain, talk about trauma!

"Did you tell him? Did the two of you laugh about it while you were screwing each other? Does everyone know? Does Iason?"

Raoul was lost. "Tell who what, Katze? What are you talking about?"

"Say you're sorry!" Had that scream come from him, Katze wondered, and he started to panic as he realized the pressure in his head was increasing.

No. No no nonononono. Not now. He couldn't black out now.

"I'm sorry!" Raoul screamed back, startled not only by Katze's behavior but his own loud response. He could see the panic, the fear rising inside of his friend and knew he had to calm Katze down. He leaned in, gathered Katze to him and held on. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Whatever it is you believe I have done, I *am* sorry."

Katze refused to think about how good Raoul smelled or how comfortable it was to have the Blondie's arms wrapped around him again. What was wrong with him? He shouldn't be thinking about any of this. He let himself lean against Raoul and, for the briefest of moments, allowed himself that one small weakness.

Raoul could feel the physical relief in Katze's body as the tension started to ease out of it. "Now, may I stay?"

Katze pulled away again and turned on his side away from Raoul. "I don't care." But he did care. He told himself Raoul should leave, especially after the way he had just insulted him.

Frustration, anger, shame, all of these had enveloped him as he felt Raoul slid off the bed and yet, a very small part of him that was buried so deep was thrilled that the Blondie would stay. He couldn't admit that when Raoul had picked him up from the floor and carried him to the bed, just like a scene out of the trashy romance novels he secretly coveted, he'd been touched and relieved. As Furniture he could never have a romance, and he didn't know why he even read the damn things, other than some sadistic tendency to torture himself, but they were his guilty pleasure and he couldn't get enough of them.

"Katze?" Raoul returned carrying an icepack. "Will you turn onto your back?"

Katze complied and stared straight up instead of at the Blondie. Raoul wrapped the icepack around his ankle and added the stabilizer boot that the clinic had given Katze, which had been tossed haphazardly into the corner of the living room and forgotten about.

Katze almost sighed as the cold slowly started to melt away the throbbing and his foot, now properly supported by the boot, stopped spasming as badly.

“Where is your medication?”

“I already took some,” Katze muttered, but then wondered why it wasn’t working? He glanced at his wrist unit and his eyes widened in horror. Had he really passed out on his bathroom floor for nearly ten hours? “Is that the right time?”

“I have to assume so.” Raoul’s chronometer had been reset but still seemed to be a little off. He had been unconscious and left for dead for nearly half a day, the truth of that bothered him. He walked over to a wall cabinet, found a blanket, returned and placed it over Katze. “You should sleep, you look exhausted.”

“No, I...I’m fine. I slept already.” He felt the burn in his cheeks as he remembered why he had passed out in the bathroom, quickly lowered his head and shifted with the appearance of trying to get comfortable. “Maybe...maybe I should take...” He began then noticed Spot standing patiently behind Raoul, a cup of coffee, a glass of amber liquid on its tray and Katze’s jacket in one of its pinchers. “Oh, good boy, Spot.” He reached for the jacket, but Raoul beat him to it. “In the left pocket, my medicine.”

Raoul retrieved the packet and scowled and the illegal substance. “This isn’t what the doctor prescribed for you.”

“No, but it doesn’t make me feel dopey either.” Katze reached for the packet and Raoul held it out of reach. “Come on!”

“Where is your proper medication, Katze?”

Katze folded his arms over his chest, defiantly. “I flushed it.”

“You’re lying. Now I can waste time searching your apartment while you sit there in pain, or you can tell me where it is and feel better much faster.”

I should have left him dead, Katze thought bitterly. “In the bathroom cabinet!”

“Good.” Raoul plucked the coffee off Spot’s tray and handed it to him, set his glass on the bedside table and tossed Katze’s jacket over a chair across the room, well out of the injured man’s reach.

“Asshole,” Katze muttered as Raoul disappeared into the bathroom. He took a sip of his coffee and smiled as the shot of brandy he’d programmed Spot to add lingered on his tongue.

Raoul returned with a bottle of painkillers and held two out to Katze. Katze took one and swallowed it with his coffee, but when Raoul continued to hold his hand steady with the second pill he rolled his eyes and took the additional one.

“I can’t concentrate when I take these,” he complained as he swallowed again.

“Good, you need to rest not think.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened to you?” Katze asked and watched as Raoul turned and walked out of the room again. “Hey!”

After several minutes, he could hear Raoul rattling things in his kitchen and quickly spit out the two pills he’d pretended to take. He could *not* be stoned while he was dealing with Raoul Am. “Spot, open.” The droid’s front slot opened and he dropped the pills into it. “Jacket.”

Spot moved across the room to the chair, picked up the jacket and was almost to the bed where Katze could reach it when a white gloved hand snatched it away from both of them. Katze glared up at Raoul.

“You are entirely too devious for your own good,” Raoul decided as he set down the bowl of soup he had programmed from Katze’s auto-chef, then shook out two more pills from the bottle and offered them to Katze. “You can take them orally or as a suppository, your choice.”

“The powder works better!”

“I know exactly what the powder does and it is highly addictive. These...” He grabbed Katze’s chin and popped the pills into his mouth before the redhead could think to close it. “Are not. Swallow, Katze.”

Katze snatched his coffee and drank it down. “There, happy?” he demanded.

“I’ll need assurances,” Raoul decided and slid his mouth over Katze’s, using his tongue to explore the inside vigorously.

Katze tried to push back against Raoul and murmured his protest, then froze as he felt an unfamiliar stirring in his groin. He tried to shut down on the feeling, on all emotion and just let Raoul do what he wanted, but it wasn’t enough and he could feel himself getting hard. In a panic he shoved at Raoul suddenly enough to break their contact.

“Don’t do that again,” Katze warned, relieved his voice held the hard edge he demanded of it.

“Jupiter tried to kill me.”

Raoul’s comment was so matter of fact, that it took Katze a moment to acknowledge the meaning of the Blondie’s words. “Say what now?”

Raoul sat down on the bed and picked up the gauze from the nightstand. “Years ago,” he continued staring at the items in his hand. “I was doing an experiment on the Human brain’s cerebral cortex functions. I was at an impasse in my work, and decided to check the functions of my own brain to compare.”

“You did brain surgery, on yourself?”

“Not exactly, it was mostly input into my computer for future research. There was no actual cutting of tissue involved, just a small patch of my scalp and a couple of probes and wires to monitor my responses.” Raoul picked up the tweezers and used it to grip the small blacked node that Katze

had removed from his brain. “I noticed this and was not sure what it was there for. I ran several tests but none of them could tell me its function. I tried to remove it, but at the time, it was fully functional and seemed embedded in my brain.”

Katze stared at the strange device. “You knew it was there?”

“Yes, from that moment I knew, but I still had not devised the reason for it; its purpose. As I am a man of science, I do like to know how things work, and as I could not solve this mystery, at least at that particular moment, I had the idea to place a shield against it.”

“A shield?” Katze pointed to the sliver on the gauze. “Is that what that is?”

“What it was.” Raoul put down the node and picked up the sliver with the tweezers. “It was larger than this, oval in shape, and I had managed to place it between the tissue of my brain and this unknown device. Then...” He said setting the sliver down and crumpling the gauze in his hand. “I forgot about it.”

“Forgot? How do you forget about a weird device in your brain?”

“Other things came up, life moved on, as did my experiments and I simply neglected to go back to figuring that mystery out...Until today.”

“What happened today, Raoul? You said Jupiter tried to kill you. How?”

“I was in Her chamber, I won’t go into details, but She became...I suppose you could say upset with me.” Raoul crushed the gauze and the remains of what had been inside him tighter in his fist as he recalled that instant of clarity, then the instant of disbelief, anger, grief, and lastly fear. “I felt a pain in my head, and my last conscious communication with Jupiter was Her intent to terminate me.”

Katze gaped at him. “But...but why? You’re a Blondie! Why would She try to kill you?”

“I am still unsure, but I believe that She may be aware, or perhaps even be the cause of what has been happening with us lately.”

“With who?”

“My brothers and I.”

“What’s been happening with the Blondies?” What the hell, Katze thought. How out of touch had his injury made him?

Raoul shook his head. “That doesn’t matter now.” He tossed the balled gauze onto Spot’s tray, watched the little robot quickly dispose of it through a slot in his chest. “When I awoke...” When he had realized he was not dead. “I knew I had to find someone I could trust to help me, so I came here.”

Katze set his empty coffee cup down and scratched his head. The pills were kicking in and the pain in his foot was easing, but his thoughts were already getting muddled. “Wait. You said Jupiter intended to kill you, I still can’t believe that, but okay. If that was Her intent, why aren’t you dead?”

“Because of that little piece of Dyrinum I implanted years ago. I believe it acted as a shield against Jupiter’s device, so instead of killing me, the impulses merely knocked me unconscious and scrambled some of my systems.”

“Is that why you were talking funny when you got here? And your eyes were red?”

“Yes, I was unable to communicate properly. I did not realize my eyes were in anger mode, you must have been frightened.” Raoul reached his hand up to cover Katze’s knee. “I apologize for that; but I am very grateful you were still able to understand me.”

“I see.”

They regarded each other quietly for several moments as they adjusted to the scope of what had happened. Jupiter had tried to kill one of Her own

and may very well be the reason everything had been so chaotic. But why? What was the purpose?

“Katze?”

“Hmmm?”

“I almost died today.” Raoul had never faced such a situation. As a Blondie he had never even considered death, except the one time he had thought Iason had died at Dana Bahn. He realized that a kernel of fear had grown inside of him from the experience. “I do not wish to die yet.”

“You didn’t. You won’t.” Katze was uncomfortable with seeing a Blondie so uncertain, but he tried to cut Raoul a break. “We’ll figure this out. Once Iason gets back, we’ll figure this out together and decide on our next move.”

“Where is Iason, Katze?”

Katze stared at him, silently and watched the Blondie slowly smile.

“Good.”

Raoul pushed away the irritation that Katze would not trust even him with the information, because he knew that the former Furniture would always be loyal to Iason first and considering their current situation, that was a very good thing.

“Do not tell me, it is probably better that I don’t know.”

Raoul had no idea if he was still connected to Jupiter in any way. He suspected not, as he felt that empty void inside of him, but that could be because Jupiter believed him dead. If She realized he was not, She might take over his mind and learn of Iason’s whereabouts, therefore it was better that he not know.

Katze shifted, uncomfortably.

“May I stay here?”

“Stay here?” Katze’s eyes widened.

“I cannot return to my own condo if I am supposed to be dead.” Raoul briefly thought of Peter and his beloved pets but knew that it was too dangerous to contact them. He would have to try and make arrangements for them anonymously.

“Oh, yeah. Well...” He didn’t really want Raoul to stay with him, he wasn’t comfortable with the Blondie, especially with the pills making him this relaxed. “I guess you’ll have to.”

“Katze,” Raoul slid closer to him on the bed leaned in. “I want to kiss you again.”

“Ah...no.”

“I feel I should reward my savior.”

“By me a new car.”

“You don’t need a new car,” Raoul stated as he felt the hot sting of arousal pierce his lower body.

He had almost died. As a Blondie he had lived his life without regret, until this moment. If he had died without tasting this beautiful, stubborn, courageous man once more, he would regret. Jupiter had been correct, he was guilty of lust when it came to Katze.

“I want to taste you, Katze.”

Katze blindly reached for the bowl of soup that Raoul had brought in earlier and shoved it between them. “Here, taste this. It’s better for you.”

Raoul pulled the bowl away and set it back on the bedside table. “It will make you forget about your ankle.”

“My ankle is fine, the meds are working.” Katze lifted a hand to push Raoul away from him, but when his hand touched the firm chest of the Blondie he felt that similar pulsing in his groin again and snatched his hand back. Not

now! For fuck's sake not now! "If...if you want to...ah...take a shower or...or something go ahead. I don't have any clothes that will fit you, but I can probably order..."

His mouth was captured mid-sentence and he tensed. "Don't," he murmured and tried to pull away but Raoul's hand snuck up behind his neck and held him in place. "Raoul, I don't...want this."

"It's just a kiss, Katze."

But it could turn out to be more, Katze worried. For the first time ever, he was showing signs of arousal and if the Blondie noticed he would be screwed, literally and figuratively.

"You shouldn't be kissing me!"

"I want to."

"That's not a reason!"

"That's the *only* reason," Raoul decided, but instead of kissing him again, Raoul lowered his head to Katze's chest and repeated his earlier words. "I almost died today."

Katze flinched before he could help it. Was Raoul trying to play on his sympathy? "Well, you didn't," he retorted in an effort to put some emotional distance between them, but when Raoul didn't move or respond, Katze wondered if the Blondie was really playing him. "Raoul?"

"Were you frightened, Katze? In that warehouse? Were you afraid to die?"

Raoul's words frightened him more than what had happened then. Had the Elite been damaged more than what he had seen? It was unfathomable for a Blondie to speak of such things. "Yes," he answered quietly. "But I was also prepared for it."

"I was not prepared." Raoul pushed up and away. He walked to Katze's jacket, where he had tossed it back in the chair, and reached into the pocket.

“What are you doing?”

“I would like a cigarette.” Raoul removed the pack and slid out two cigarettes, both natural filters as Katze had lost his special pack. He found the lighter and lit both, then walked over and handed one to Katze. “I have never contemplated dying,” he said as he walked to the other side of the bed and settled upon it, pulling his legs up so he sat next to Katze against the head of the bed.

“No, I guess not.” Katze inhaled deeply and sighed, he actually needed this. “A whole lot of shit is going to go down, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Raoul crossed his feet at the angles and exhaled, watching the smoke drift upwards. “A whole lot of shit indeed.”

“How much in trouble is Iason in?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it is just Iason. I think we’re all in it, up to our necks.”

The two sat on the bed smoking silently until their cigarettes were almost finished.

“Katze?”

“Hmmm?” Katze doused the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray he kept on his nightstand then handed it to Raoul to do the same with his.

“What exactly did I apologize for earlier?”

Katze flushed and lowered his head as he set the dish back on the table. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“No, I wish to know. I feel I have injured you somehow, or you would not have been so angry.” Raoul set his gloved hand over Katze’s bare one on the bed. “You must tell me.”

“It doesn’t matter. I...I was just being stupid. I’m sorry for acting like that. I think it was just because I was in pain.”

“Are we really not friends?”

Katze felt a twinge of guilt settle in his chest and then drop to his stomach. Had he really said that? “No. I mean, yeah, sure, we’re friends.”

“Good. I trust you, Katze. You were the only one I could think of to help me earlier.”

“Okay.” Katze wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Then, well...I’m sorry for hitting you and...and yelling at you.”

“Tell me why you were angry.”

Katze sighed, because Raoul did deserve an explanation. “I...when I called you and you asked me about...my episodes, you said it in front of Gideon. I thought you had told him about me.” He decided not to mention how he had also noticed how obvious it had been that the pair had just had sex, and how that had also somehow also upset him.

“You thought I had betrayed you.”

“Yes.” In more ways than one.

Raoul removed his hand and slid off the bed. “I see.”

Katze bit his lip as he watched the Blondie rise. “I was hurting, Raoul. I wasn’t thinking clearly and...”

“It’s fine. You still do not trust me, I understand that.”

“I do trust you!” Katze assured when Raoul moved towards the door. Don’t leave, he thought desperately. If Jupiter was trying to kill Her own, it wasn’t safe for Raoul to leave! “As...as much as I can trust you. I mean...Iason comes first, he has to come first, but...”

Raoul paused at the doorway but didn’t turn back. “Was that the only reason you were upset, Katze?”

“Huh?”

“You thought I had betrayed your secrets. Was that the only reason you were angry?”

Katze stared down at his hands and wished for another cigarette. “This medication is making me sleepy,” he said and slid down in the bed. “I’m going to take a nap.

“Alright.”

“Raoul.”

The Blondie turned to him.

“Stay, okay? At least until we figure out what’s going on. Iason should be contacting me soon and we’ll figure all this out. Okay?”

Raoul smirked. “Are you trying to reassure me, Katze?”

Katze shrugged. “I just think it’s safer for you to stay, that’s all.”

Raoul walked to the bed. “May I sleep with you then?”

“S...sleep with me?”

Raoul nodded. “I’m actually quite exhausted.”

“Oh. Sleep as in...yeah, I mean yes you can sleep...nap with me.”

Raoul returned to the other side of the bed, pulled off his boots, his gloves and his long jacket, leaving him in his slacks and sleeveless tunic. He laid down on the bed facing Katze and pulled the blanket he had placed over the man earlier across both of them.

“Thank you, Katze.” He again settled his hand over Katze’s on the bed, then closed his eyes and set his system to sleep.

Katze lay awake for awhile longer, before he too drifted off.

Notes for the Chapter:

HOW DO YA LIKE ME NOW?? :-)

Chapter 35

Summary for the Chapter:

The best way to wake up...

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, I've delayed THIS SCENE long enough. This chapter is dedicated to Megha Shakya, Khalys Kuran, Dardar1, RemyQuinn, DM, for making you cry. :-)

Katze awoke to a soft, featherlight touch against his lips. If he had been fully awake he would have pulled away, but instead he leaned into the kiss, opening his mouth to the sensuous invasion. He liked this, he realized. He'd always enjoyed kissing and was talented enough at it that he could make a woman or a man melt under him enough that they always gave up the needed information. Sex, or the promise of it, could be used as a tool or trade even outside of Ceres, so it was one that Katze had occasionally utilized, but he had never been aroused by kissing. No, those past kisses had never made him feel like this.

Still half asleep and deeply relaxed from the medication he'd taken earlier he slid an arm up to curl around a long, slim neck, then his other as he slid his fingers through hair that was as soft as Saturn silk and tickled his skin while lips devoured his mouth.

"Katze," Raoul murmured even as he pulled the red-head closer to him and slid his hand down to cup Katze's firm, tight ass. "Katze, I want you."

Either the touch or the words had the effect of cold water thrown over him and Katze suddenly pulled back as his eyes flew open. "What are you doing?"

“We are doing it together.” Raoul reached for him again and Katze caught the Blondie’s wrist to prevent direct touch. “Katze?”

“We can’t do this. I’m not Riki and you’re not Iason. We can’t do this, Raoul.”

Raoul nimbly caught Katze’s hands and pinned them over his head so he could leer down at him. “I know exactly who we are and why we are here.”

“It’s against the Jupiter’s law!”

“Fuck Jupiter’s laws!” Raoul growled. “She tried to kill me, Katze. She may have even been the one behind Iason’s assault. Do you think I give a damn about Her or those ridiculous laws anymore?”

“So...what? You’re doing this because you’re mad at Her?”

Raoul paused and considered, then shook his head. He *was* angry with Jupiter, livid actually, but that was not why he wanted to be with Katze. Jupiter had uncovered Raoul’s deepest secret, his attraction to Katze, and since She had; and he’d survived what he realized had been Her punishment; he saw no reason why he had to hide his feelings any longer.

“I am doing this because I want *you*, Katze. It has nothing to do with Jupiter.”

“Why?” Katze stared up at the Blondie, frustrated. “Why me? I’m Furniture!”

“You are so much more than that.” Raoul kept Katze’s hands pinned with one hand while his other slid inside Katze’s shirt to the bare skin beneath it. “I enjoy looking at you, touching you.”

“I’m not a pet!”

“No.” Raoul kissed him gently, once, twice on the lips, then moved to mark a trail across Katze’s throat. “I would never do this with a pet.”

“Damnit it, I said no!”

“Your mouth says no, but your body, mmmmm.” Raoul pinched the ripe nipple beneath his gloved fingers, enjoyed the sudden arch of the man’s body towards his, before Katze had the chance to control it. “Your body is screaming yes, yes, yes!”

“It’s screaming because you’re scaring the shit out of it!”

Raoul chuckled. “Ah, Katze. I adore your wit.”

“Raoul...” Katze began and felt himself responding even more to the Blondie’s touch.

What the hell was happening? He had never reacted like this to anyone, not even when that brute was fucking him. He gasped as Raoul’s hand brushed over his groin, felt himself grow and thicken and panic pushed away his anger as a shudder overtook him.

That’s right, scream for your daddy. Fuck you’re tight. Yeah! Yeah, scream more! Look how you’re sucking me in you filthy whore!

No. Nononono. “Stop. You have to...”

Raoul lifted his head and looked down into Katze’s eyes where he saw fear, confusion and surprisingly, arousal. “I will not hurt you, Katze. I am not like your father.”

“No. You have to stop. You have to...” He was falling, Katze realized, into that dark pit again that would bring him pain and darkness and a complete loss of control. “Please, Raoul, you...”

“Perhaps it will cure your episodes?” Raoul decided as he managed to divest Katze of his shirt, while maintaining a firm hold on his hands.

“Liar!”

“I believe they are caused by your own desire.” Raoul paused in his exploration and stared down into the golden eyes that wanted to rip him in half. Good, anger was better than fear, fear lead to the past, so Raoul had to just keep Katze snapping with outrage, at least until he had the Human

gasping with desire. “You continue to fight against it. Such feelings are unknown to you given your history, and so your mind is not able to cope with them. This is why you keep reverting to yourself as a child, because this is your only reference for such desire.”

Katze stared up at him. Could it be true? “How...why would I?” he began as he tried to comprehend Raoul’s theory. “I’ve...I’ve felt desire before. I... I came sometimes...with my...with him. I know what it means!”

“No. What you experienced was a physical response from your body, one you had no control over and one you associate with pain and humiliation. You are Furniture, yet you still have the anatomy of a man. It is possible that your physical desire has been stunted all this time, or perhaps...” Raoul paused and kissed Katze until the man beneath him was nearly breathless. “You did not have the proper stimulation.”

Katze tried to push Raoul away. “Whatever the reason, I can’t do this! If my blackouts are caused by it then I’ll just revert and you’ll find yourself fucking a child!”

Raoul held his gaze for a long, hard moment. “A valid point.” Katze barely had the chance to breathe a sigh of relief, when Raoul suddenly reversed their positions so that Katze was on top of him.

“What are you...?”

“You take me, Katze.” Raoul placed Katze’s trembling hands on his chest. “You control what happens. Kiss me. Touch me. Do anything you want. It’s all for you.”

Desire swamped Katze, as well as a warmth he could not identify, both made him tremble uncontrollably. Was the Blondie truly offering to be fucked? It didn’t seem possible. Or maybe, Raoul was just horny and he was the only one around?

“I’m not Gideon,” he stated and would have climbed off the Blondie if Raoul hadn’t clamped his hands around Katze’s hips.

“I don’t want Gideon, Katze. I want *you*.”

The words were both a lie and a miracle to Katze. He couldn’t believe them and yet he wanted, more than anything to do just that. His dick was growing harder inside his pants as he felt the Blondie’s arousal rub against his bottom and he wet his lips.

“I belong to Iason.”

“Iason is not here, and I will never tell him of this, unless you bid me do so.” Raoul carefully sat up and shifted Katze on his lap, careful of the other man’s injured foot which was still in the stabilizer boot. “You have secrets with Iason.” He rubbed Katze’s arms and stared into the eyes that had always reminded him of unrefined topaz. “Why can you not have a few with me?”

“I have no secrets from Iason.”

“Ah, but you did.” Raoul traced Katze’s hardened cock with a long, gloved finger. “You kept this from him.”

“But he knew...”

“You were unaware of his knowledge. You begged me not to tell him the truth, or about your episodes.”

“I didn’t beg!”

“I kept your secrets, Katze.” Raoul nibbled Katze’s neck, found he was developing an addiction to the taste of the red-head. “I will keep this one as well.”

“This is on a whole other level!”

“I don’t care.” Raoul captured Katze’s face between his hands and captured his mouth in a soul-searing kiss.

“I’m scared,” Katze admitted when he could breathe, when he could think again. He realized that he had never admitted that to another living soul, not

even to Iason.

“I know.” Raoul caressed Katze’s cheek. “I too feel uncertain as to the possible consequences, yet I feel current circumstances being what they are, we may never get another chance.”

Katze’s eyes widened as the Blondies’ words sunk in as he considered all that had happened the past several months. “It’s going to be bad, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Katze absorbed his answer with the harsh, brutal reality that was his nature, and it gave him pause. Whether Raoul was angry with Jupiter or looking for a quick lay before the shit hit the fan, the truth of the matter was that the Blondie spoke the truth. If Jupiter was killing Her own creations or causing the current chaos, all bets were off. Once they stepped outside this apartment again, one or both of them could end up dead,

“Do you understand that this is not something I do lightly?” Raoul continued when Katze remained silent. “This is not a game for me, and you are not a pet to me. Do you understand this?”

“Then...what am I?”

“I don’t know,” Raoul answered honestly. “I only know that I want you, now before circumstances prevent such an opportunity again. If this is made easier by you taking me first, then that is what we will do.” He paused a long moment. “Well? What do you want to do, Katze?”

“Raoul...This is so many ways of wrong I can’t even begin...” Katze began chewing on his lower lip, a bad habit he had broken himself of years ago.

Right and wrong had always been fluid on Amoï. It was more knowing what you could and couldn’t get away with and having the connections for those in power to turn a blind eye. Iason had trusted him for years to make those decisions on his own, and yet this...this was a decision he hesitated over. He rarely hesitated, he always knew just what to do and how his choice would best serve his business and in turn, his master.

“It is your move, Katze.” Raoul lay back, but kept his hands on Katze’s hips, and waited.

“I can do anything I want?”

“Yes.”

Katze held Raoul’s gaze, then reached for the Blondie’s right hand and slowly pulled off his glove. “Even this?”

“Yes.”

Katze pulled off the other glove, assuming that Raoul would, as most elites might, find the idea of touching him barehanded too disgusting to continue, but Raoul simply slid his fingers against Katze’s chest so flesh touch flesh.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Were you hoping it would?”

“A little, yeah.”

Raoul smiled and slid his other hand over Katze’s ass. “Your plan failed.”

Katze huffed out a breath and tried to think. He wouldn’t get far if he tried to make a run for it, and yet part of him had no real intention of attempting it. Something inside pulled at him to stay, to continue, to see where it would all lead. A sensation, premonition, *something* told him he would find what he had been looking for. For the life of him, he couldn’t even imagine what that was but he could only deal with what was in front of him. What was in front of him was a very large, very beautiful, very horny Blondie

Maybe if he just got Raoul off they could end this and all these weird thoughts and feelings mucking around inside of him would go away? With that thought in mind, he started to unfasten the buttons of Raoul’s tunic. He had never seduced anyone beyond a little kissing and touching, but he had been trained on how to do it, and as he lowered his mouth to Raoul’s bare chest, he tried to ignore his shaking hands and the heart pounding frantically against his ribcage.

Raoul slid his hand over Katze's hair and enjoyed the man's attentions, especially when Katze's mouth settled over one of his nipples. A spark of desire flooded him. It was all so different from what he had felt when Gideon, or even Iason had done similar acts to him and he had a moment of regret that he had even done such a thing with his brothers.

"Lower," Raoul whispered, encouragingly and Katze obliged, freeing the Blondie from boots first, and then his trousers, taking the time to carefully pull them all the way off, before taking the engorged organ into his mouth.

Raoul's cock was huge! Katze hoped oral would satisfy the Blondie because the idea of the mammoth penis going inside of him made his mouth dry and his ass ache. And yet, his own cock was harder than ever. Soon, however, he forgot about anything but the object inside his mouth. It was a feeling he suspected he wouldn't enjoy, and yet his body trembled from all the new sensations it was causing inside him.

Raoul suddenly caught Katze's shoulders and pulled him up for deep, sensuous kiss, then slowly slid Katze's trousers down over his ass, when they got caught up in the stabilizer boot, he simply ripped them so they fell away from the beautiful Human's body.

He felt Katze tense but kept a firm hand on Katze's back to prevent retreat.
"Now, Katze."

"I...I can't do that," Katze muttered and shyly hid his face in the crook of the Blondie's neck. Even as he voiced his concern, he could feel moisture leaking from the tip of his cock at the idea of being inside of someone.

"Oh, but you can." Raoul opened his legs wider and pulled his knees up as he reached down and guided Katze to his opening. "I want you to, Katze. It will feel so good for you, for us both. Do this for me, do it now."

"No! It isn't..." Katze gasped as Raoul grabbed his hips and pulled him forward, he found himself completely sheathed inside the Blondie's hot, tight body. "Oh God!" His hips started moving of their own accord and it was a feeling unlike any he had ever felt before.

With his father, and those other men, he had always been the one being fucked. Never had any of them let him do this and when he became Furniture he couldn't do this for risk of revealing his secret. But now the feeling was not only new, but also something else entirely. Was this what pleasure felt like, he wondered, what it truly felt like?

Raoul reached up and gripped the intricate metal railing of the headboard in an attempt to clamp down on his own desire, as Katze began to thrust with abandon. Clever boy, he thought when Katze managed, after only a few initial thrusts, to find just the right angle and rhythm that felt the best for Raoul.

His free hand continued to make soothing circles against Katze's back, wanting to keep the man grounded, here, with him and not fade into his childhood. When he heard Katze's breath hitch, almost on a sob, he could not be sure if it was desire or fear, and so he lifted his fingers to Katze's mouth to give the man something else to focus on. He slid them inside and enjoyed the mongrel's sucking on them, then he slid his hand down and pushed one finger inside Katze. Katze jolted in panic, but Raoul released the bed guard and caught Katze's chin with his free hand, forced the man to look at him.

"It is only me. Nothing can hurt you here. It is only me, Katze."

Soon Katze was pushing back against the fingers intruding inside his body as much as he was thrusting forward. When his orgasm hit, he went deaf, dumb and blind in a simultaneous clash of colour and sensation, and then almost immediately was rolled onto his back as Raoul plunged inside of him. He screamed!

"It hurts! Fuck! Raoul, it hurts!"

"Bear with it," Raoul insisted as he plunged deeper and deeper into Katze's hole. "Touch yourself, Katze. Let me see your pleasure."

Willing to try anything to distract from the pain, Katze brought a trembling hand to his softening cock and slowly started to stroke. He knew the mechanics of masturbation, had been trained in multiple techniques, but he

had never really used them on himself, well except for the incident earlier in his bathroom and then he hadn't been aware of what he was doing. Raoul's intense gaze did nothing to help with his nerves and embarrassment over the act.

Raoul was so close to completion already. It had been part of a fantasy he had only been slightly aware of having. Katze kissing him, touching him, sucking him and then finally inside of him. It had been both appalling and wonderful, shameful yet delightful. Now, he needed more, just that tiny bit more to push him over, to push him farther, he felt, than he had ever gone.

It was the sound of Katze's whimper that pulled him from his own frantically lustful thoughts.

"Please," Katze said in a voice, so young, so innocent that Raoul instantly froze.

Raoul captured Katze's face with hands that trembled with need. "Katze. Stay with me."

"Father...."

"No. It's Raoul. Your father is not here, he is gone, long gone. He can never hurt you again, it is just us."

"Gone?"

"Yes, dead and gone. It's only us now, only you and I." Raoul kissed Katze's forehead. "Open your eyes and look at me. See that I am here."

"Hurts," Katze sobbed but still opened his eyes.

"It will stop hurting. I promise you, it will, but you have to let go of your fear, my darling. You have to be a man now. You're Katze, remember? You're a grown man doing grown up things."

He watched with a mixture of relief and fascination as the golden eyes cleared, darkened and age seemed to slip across Katze's features, as a child became a man.

“Raoul?”

“I’m here. I’m right here.”

Katze blinked twice, shifted and suddenly recalled where he was and what was happening. “What are you doing?”

“At the moment, I am doing you.” Raoul smiled and thrust very gently to remind Katze of their connection. “You had your turn, this is mine.” His smile faded as he carefully assessed Katze’s state of mind. “Are you alright?”

“Did I regress?”

“For a moment only, and you came back almost immediately.”

“Oh. Well...I guess that’s progress.”

“I would say so. May I continue?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No, not really.”

Raoul smiled and slowly started to move again, keeping his thrusts shallow at first to ease Katze’s discomfort. He was even more delighted when Katze resumed his masturbation with a reluctant, but steady hand.

It was hypnotic, Raoul realized, as he watched Katze’s expression go from discomfort and reluctance, to relief and then finally to pleasure. Yes, pleasure, Katze’s face glowed with the wonder of the experience, the golden eyes melted with acceptance and then the unrivaled thrill of it. He started to thrust faster and faster and was delighted when Katze’s moans of pain turned to gasps of pleasure as the man’s hand moved faster over his own cock.

This, he thought, was what he had been searching for all this time. All his learning, all his experiments that he believed would bring him the ultimate knowledge he so desperately sought, only it had not been knowledge but a

connection he had wanted. He had searched for it in science and philosophy, in the inner workings of the mind and body of several different species and even in the comfort and intimacy of Iason and Gideon. He had searched for it in his pets and in his own kind and yet he had never found it; until now.

This was the ultimate knowledge he had spent a lifetime seeking. This feeling, this connection, not just physical, not just emotional, but on both levels and yet neither of them; on a unique level all its own. The feeling, the knowledge that he could care, truly care for someone other than himself. It was passion. It was tolerance. It was fate. It was *love*.

He came in a glorious wave of ecstasy, thrilled when he heard Katze do the same, and slowly, the emptiness that Jupiter had left inside of him, the gap he had tried centuries to fill overflowed and then settled in a pleasant warmth that lingered way down deep inside him, in a place that Jupiter could never touch.

Gideon stepped out of his vehicle and started towards the darkened industrial park. There was still time, he thought. He could fix this. Jupiter had understood his remorse, understood that he was the only one who could save Iason; wasn't that why She had let him go?

He slipped through a gate that had been chained, but now the links lay broken against it. Yes, there was still a chance to save him, to save them both. The situation had gone too far out of hand but he could make it right.

“Issac?” he called out as he saw a cloaked figure moved in the shadows.
“Issac, you need to come home, brother. You need...”

“Who is Issac?” The Shadow demanded. “There is no one here but you and I.”

“Issac, you are not well.” Gideon’s eyes narrowed as the Furniture Bean appeared beside his master. “Let me take you home and...”

“You stole him from us. That which we desire. You stole him away and now we can’t find him!”

Why was the Blondie speaking in the third person as Jupiter had? Was there some sort of glitch that was transferring to the minds of the Blondies? Was that what was causing all of these problems?

Gideon stepped forward. “Brother, please, let me take you back to the clinic. I was wrong to let you out. You need help.”

“Help? Do you intend to help me, *brother*?” The last word was snarled as the Shadow moved forward, dressed all in black with a mask hiding his pale face. “Is that why you stole Iason away?”

“I didn’t steal him away. Issac, you tried to kill him, for Jupiter’s sake!”

“No!” The figure surged forward, grabbed Gideon and shoved the Blondie against a large stationary fueling tank. “It was an accident! I would never hurt Iason! It was your fault! You let him get hurt!”

“I didn’t send that vehicle into his home, that was you! *You* did this, Issac, and now you must come with me so we can...” Gideon was released so suddenly he forgot what he had been about to say. He watched his brother pace in front of him, agitated.

“In my head. It’s in my head and won’t leave me be!” He ripped his mask off and tears, actual tears slid down Issac’s face. “It hurts! We have to listen but it hurts!”

“What or who is in your head, brother?” Gideon asked, stepping closer, appalled at the grief ravaged face before him. “Is someone making you do these things? You must tell me.”

Issac moaned and gripped his head as if trying to keep it secured to his shoulders. “Never ends. Love, so much love, Iason...Hate, so much hate...

Iason. Stop it. Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

Gideon surged forward to wrap his arms around Issac and was suddenly thrown backwards against a stack of heavy materials.

As he crawled to his feet, he saw that the pain, agony and innocence of Issac had once more been replaced with the cold, faceless mask of The Shadow. “Issac?”

“Why are you here?” The Shadow demanded in an icy voice. “Why do you continue to interfere?”

“I’m trying to help you, Issac. You are not well and...”

“I have never felt better. Do not disturb us again, or we will kill you.” The Shadow turned and disappeared into the shadows.

Gideon moved to go after his brother but Bean stepped in front of him, smiled and wagged his finger back and forth. “How dare you...” he began then noticed the grenade in the Furniture’s hand. He leapt, just as Bean tossed the device at him. He managed to clear the blast area, but the shock wave hit him in the back and sent him spiraling end over end, then slammed him to the ground outside the fenced area.

Gideon slowly rose to his feet, dusted off his clothing and desperately tried to find a logical reason for Issac’s behavior. There was none. His brother was well and truly mad, and that child with him was possibly even more dangerous. He understood now that the only one who could stop Issac was the person Issac was most obsessed with. He needed to find Iason before it was too late.

He quickly climbed back into his vehicle and started back for Tanagura. Issac wouldn’t listen to him, then he would have to go to Iason and confess everything. He’d tried to avoid it, his brother was not the most forgiving of Blondies, but there was now no choice. Issac was troubled, possibly being driven mad by some secret entity. If anyone could help...

Raoul would be a better alternative than Iason. Raoul was familiar with diseases of the mind, but he couldn't go to Raoul as Raoul would not believe him. So, he would have to find Iason and face the consequences.

A long black transport almost rammed into him as he turned onto the main highway and he cursed, glaring at it.

"What the devil?" he swore aloud as he increased his speed and moved up to the side of the transport. "Where did you learn to drive?"

The windows of the vehicle were dark, but with his Blondie vision he could make out the image and signature of a dozen Onyx. Where were they going this time of the night and why? Were the miners revolting again, or had there been an incident in the West that demanded a squad to force obedience?

He switched on his news channel and almost drove into the transport when he saw his face flashed across it, along with the repeating words of the newscaster. Raoul dead? How could this be? He was suspect? How could he be suspect? Raoul had left Jupiter's tower yesterday, well before he had. What was going on?

With a quick glance at the transport, which had gained some distance while he had been attempting to process this new dilemma, he wondered if they were looking for him? Only one way to find out, he decided, and continued to follow from a discrete distance.

Chapter 36

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and Shiao battle Onyxs while Katze and Raoul make their escape.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am so so happy you enjoyed the last chapter. I hope you like this one too. Thanks for all the wonderful support I love you all!!!

Shiao guided their shuttle over the coordinates that Iason had given him and saw a plume of black smoke coming from the structure below.

“Is that it?” he asked Iason.

“Yes.” Iason stared down at the burning beach house and noticed that the force shield that had surrounded it had been removed or destroyed. “Get us on the ground.”

“Whoever did this may still be on site, Iason.”

“Get us down. *Now!*” Iason ordered and moved to the back of the shuttle. He slapped his hand over the control that would open the entry hatch as Shiao made another sweep.

“The scanners aren’t picking up any...” Shiao began as he heard the hatch open and turned just in time to see Iason leap out. “I would have had us down in a minute!”

He shook his head and quickly dropped the triad of landing gear as the craft settled into the soft sand. Grabbing two blasters from a weapons locker behind the cockpit, he jumped out. The house was an inferno and he could see Iason running towards it.

“It is useless, Iason!” he warned and started after him. “They could not have survived!”

His attention was diverted suddenly when a red laser blast passed within a centimeter of his hair. Dodging the next volley, he lifted his hand and retuned fire with unmistakable aim. The Onyx’s head flew back and its body followed, dropping to the ground in an almost comical poof of sand. Looking ahead again he saw four more firing at Iason and paused to admire that which he helped create.

The Blondie was zig-zagging between the red lasers without decreasing his speed, if anything he became faster. The first Onyx was taken out as Iason leapt into the air and landed with both feet upon its chest, increasing his weight exponentially so that the landing shattered the chest of the assailant beneath him. A sidekick and a double chested blow incapacitated the second Onyx, even as a third came up and grabbed Iason from behind. Iason flipped him, but the Onyx was on his feet again within seconds. The pair fought with a dizzying display of punches, blocks and kicks, but Iason’s speed and fury was no match; he found an opening soon enough to deliver a punch into and straight through the Onyx’ sternum; wrenching his hand out almost immediately with an assortment of bloody components.

The forth Onyx kept his weapon raised and continued to step back as Iason advanced.

“By order of Jupiter, I command you to surrender.”

“You did this on Jupiter’s order?” Iason demanded as he continued forward.
“*She* ordered you to kill my people?”

“You will halt and surrender or you will be arrested and detained. Under Jupiter’s...”

Iason had reached the Onyx and yanked the weapon out of the Elite’s hand.
“Why do you not aim for my head?” he demanded, for he had noticed while the others had shot at him, it was obvious they were not aiming for the one vital organ he had. “Why do you not kill me?”

“By Jupiter’s command you will...Uuurrkk!” The Onyx stopped talking as he was lifted of the ground by the throat.

“*Answer me!* I am Iason Mink, son of Jupiter and leader of the Syndicate. You will answer me. Did Jupiter order their death?”

“Yes.”

“But not mine?”

“We...” The Onyx tried to break the Blondie’s hold and was becoming alarmed that he could not. Blondies were said to be more intelligent, more properly social than the lower Elites, but their bodies were of a similar material and durability. He had heard rumors that Mink was Jupiter’s prized pet but could he truly be so much more powerful?

“You will not answer?” Iason replied, softly. “Then you will die.” He put the Onyx’s own weapon to his head.

“We are to take you back to Jupiter!” the Onyx insisted, suddenly not wanting to die.

There was a mild chance for recovery if he was shot in the head and could get into a rejuvenation chamber quickly enough, but they were too far from Tanagura and a close-range shot would easily penetrate the nearly impenetrable polymer of his skull.

“Why?” Iason shook him when he did not immediately answer. “Why were you ordered to kill?”

“We were given orders. We must obey them.”

“Yes. You must obey.” Iason slowly lowered the weapon and set the Onyx on his feet. “They were my family.”

The Onyx, who had felt a moment of relief at the reprieve had no chance to think anything else as Iason stepped back and fired a steady volley of lasers into the soldier’s skull, completely obliterating the lower Elite’s face.

Shiao stepped up behind Iason and stared down at the melting, smoldering mass of the replicas that had replaced him. “Was that necessary?”

“Yes.” Iason shoved the weapon at him and stared at the burning house. Cal, he thought. Yielia. How would he tell Riki that he had failed to protect them? Finally, he lowered his eyes and turned back towards the ship, paused at the trail of bodies that littered the path he had taken; not all had his doing. “You have been busy.”

Shiao shrugged, a habit he had picked up from Guy. “They are only incapacitated, not dead.”

“We can change that.”

Shiao caught Iason’s arm. “They were only obeying orders, Iason. This is not their fault.”

Iason turned on him. “Orders? They have a mind, they should use it! This is wrong. To attack the household of a Blondie cannot be forgiven.” Not even when the order came from their own creator, he thought furiously. He’d had his reservations about Shiao’s suspicions against Jupiter, but it seemed the Onyx had been correct. It hurt, he realized, to accept such a truth.

Shiao’s hand moved up to Iason’s shoulder. “I am deeply sorry for your loss.”

“I cannot tell him.” Iason stared out at the water bleakly. “He will despise me for this. I cannot go back without them, Shiao.”

Shiao didn’t need to ask who Iason was referring to. “This was not your fault Iason. Riki cannot blame you for an act of violence ordered by Jupiter.”

Iason smirked, sighed and shook his head. “You do not know Riki. He blames me for everything, always. There will be no coming back from this.”

“If he is such a man, why keep him? Seems a waste and an annoyance.”

“He is mine. I cannot be without him.”

Shiao nodded. Since meeting Guy, he too understood this feeling, “They are strange creatures, these Mongrels. They have decent intelligent and often above average skills, yet they lead with their hearts always.”

Iason could only nod, even as Shiao gently turned him and guided the Blondie back towards the shuttle.

“Master!”

Iason turned instantly and saw a figure emerging from the water, then another, and finally a third, much taller one. His eyes narrowed and his elation turned to fury as he started towards them.

“Master!” Cal said breathlessly as he stepped onto the solid sand, away from the cold water of the sea, but Iason was not looking at him. He stepped aside, pulling Yielia with him as Iason trudged through the surf, the waves splashing up to his calves as he reached for the traitor who had risen behind them.

“You!”

Gideon caught Iason’s left hand in his before the Blondie could connect, but wasn’t fast enough for the right, which gripped him by his sodding tunic, then his arm as he and was suddenly dragged him further out to sea.

“Iason! Iason, stop! Let me explain! Iason!”

“Master!” Cal cried and tried to run after them but Shiao was already running into the water.

The waves did nothing to hamper Iason’s speed and determination as he dragged the struggling Gideon through them. Blondies could not swim, their bodies were too heavy, but nor could they drown. He would drag his traitorous brother to the very bottom of this damned sea, incapacitate him and let him lie for all eternity.

Gideon tried everything to break away, but Iason was too strong. It seemed inconceivable, they should be evenly matched, but each time he broke Iason's grip on one part of his body, Iason simply found another part to latch onto, his wrist, his neck, his hair. The waves were also a factor and Gideon found he could not get solid purchase on the slippery seabed floor.

He did not wish to hurt Iason, but it seemed he was left with no choice, and so he punched at the Blondie repeatedly. Iason took the blows for a while, until the water reached their waists and then he suddenly turned and hit Gideon's chest with the flat of his hand so hard the Blondie flew backwards into the waves. Iason crouched, grabbed Gideon's leg and continued to haul him further out.

He was startled when Shiao suddenly surfaced in front of him. He glanced back towards the beach, and the two figures which seemed much further away than he thought they should be, then turned his attention back to the Onyx.

“Move.”

“You should not kill him, Iason.”

“Do think you can stop me?”

“No,” Shiao admitted and swept the wet hair out of his eyes. “At least not without critically injuring you and I do not wish that. Please, let us take him back and...”

“No! No second chances, no reprieves. He destroyed my home, attacked my family and killed Raoul. I will not kill him, but he will suffer.” Iason tried to shove past Shiao and was surprised when the Onyx simply pushed backwards and floated on his back. “You...How are you doing that?”

“Doing what?” Shiao asked, noticed he had caught Iason’s interest and using it as a distraction slid beneath the waves, swam around and popped up behind Iason. “This?”

“We *cannot* swim. We are too heavy.”

“Ah, but remember, Iason. I am the first of you, the original model.” Shiao ducked beneath the waves again and checked that Gideon was not undamaged, the Blondie sat underwater and was struggling to free his leg while Iason’s attention was diverted. He surfaced in front of Iason again, smiled. “I am made of a lighter material, but you can do it too, it just takes practice. I can teach you if you like?”

Iason realized that he would like to swim. He wanted to be able to swim with Riki, who seemed to love the water so much. It would be something new that they could do together. Riki. He looked back towards the beach again. Cal. Yielia. They were alive. He should go back, bring them back and tell Riki...He felt Gideon’s foot turning shallow and realized the Blondie was trying to pull off his boot.

“You are distracting me!” he accused Shiao, reached beneath the waves and grabbed Gideon up by the collar.

Gideon blew out a thin stream of water into Iason’s face. “Are you trying to kill me?” he demanded, then fell back on his usual humor to defuse the situation. “There are fish down there, you know, and I think they like the taste of Blondie.”

“Good, then they shall get a great feast.” Iason started pulling him forward again. “It will take them decades, perhaps centuries to consume you, and that is exactly the justice you deserve for killing Raoul!”

“Damn it all, Iason, will you listen to me?” Gideon managed to wrestle away from Iason, as the water as the rapid succession of waves, rolling in with the tide, were becoming hindrance for them both. “I did not kill Raoul!” Gideon put his hand to his soaking chest. “I am as upset about it as you are.”

“Liar! I cannot kill you but you will pay!”

Shiao slipped between them when Iason made another grab for Gideon. “We can use him, Iason. If he is aware of Jupiter’s plans we can use that. Listen to reason!”

“Master!”

Cal’s young, concerned voice carried across the waves towards him and Iason was torn between his revenge and his need to confirm the boy’s safety and health.

“Fine, but if he proves to be of no use, he will find himself shot into space.” Iason smiled menacingly and watched his brother swallow, hard. “Which may be a more appropriate justice.”

Gideon stared at Iason appalled, then felt his arm was taken once again, but he knew this grip would remain unbroken. He looked up, and up at the wet Onyx. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Gideon Lagat. And the name of my savior?”

“I am not your savior, Blondie,” Shiao stated darkly as they headed inland. “I would as soon leave you here to be food for the fish.”

“Then why did you intervene?”

Shiao’s eyes never strayed from Iason as the Blondie moved closer to shore. “He has lost quite enough for one day. Perhaps when he is recovered from that loss, I will let him toss you into space.”

“I did not kill Raoul!”

“You will be quiet now. Any further speech will anger Iason further and annoy me, and...” Shiao turned red hot eyes towards Gideon. “I am under no obligation to spare the life of a *Blondie*.”

Iason finally reached Cal who, he realized was shivering from the cold. “Are you injured?”

Cal shook his head. “No. we’re f...fine, really. Master Gideon got us out and into the w...water, just before the attack. He said we h...had to hide.” He glanced at Yielia, who was also wet and shivering. “I couldn’t swim with my arm, so...” He lifted the arm that had once been injured. “Yielia healed it so I c...could swim.” Cal smiled shyly. “Riki was still teaching me, but I

managed well enough, and Master Gideon guided us out to the d...deep parts, father than the Onyx would check.”

“How were you able to breathe?”

“I...m...made a b...bubble,” Yielia chattered as she wrapped her arms around herself. The sun was setting and after almost an hour in the cold water she was chilled straight through. “So we c...could breathe. It...it is a technique we u...use on Ava...Avalon to help overcome f...fear of water.”

Iason lifted his hand to her cheek. “You did very well, Yielia. Thank you. Come, let us get you both warm.”

“S...Sir...how is...Riki? I...Is he o...okay?”

“Yes, Riki is fine, I will take you too him. He will be very glad to see you.” Iason tapped Cal’s nose. “And you are to call me Iason, remember?”

“Oh...yes. Iason. I forgot. The c...cold has seeped into my brain I think.”

Shiao stepped aboard the shuttle and promptly shoved Gideon into a small cargo hold, closed and locked it.

“You’re being very inhospitable!” Gideon called, annoyed. “You could at least get me some dry clothes!”

Shiao closed the hatch and moved to the cockpit to start the engines, he noticed that the injured Onyx by the shuttle were starting to rise, well, all but the ones Iason had attacked.

“Do we have any blankets?” Iason demanded, poking his head in.

“Yes, third cabinet from the left, there should be some bodysuits as well.” He lifted his hand and engaged a sequence of switches on the controls, then ignited the thrusters. “Get some hot soup into them, it will help raise their body temperature.”

Iason found the blankets, wrapped each of them in one, then hung a third across a small archway to give Yielia some privacy to change, at Cal’s

suggestion as Iason did not understand why the female should need privacy.

He got Cal dried off and into one of the black jump suits, which lengthened or shortened to the appropriate length. Slipping into one himself, as his own clothes were soaking wet, he found it a little too constricting for his liking, but it would have to do.

“If you’ll show me where the replicator is, I’ll fetch us something warm, Si...Iason,” Cal said, his head lowering shyly on his Master’s name.

“You sit right there,” Iason insisted, gently guiding Cal to one of the shuttle chairs as Yielia stepped out from behind the curtain. “I’ll take care of that.” He dropped his bare hand onto Cal’s still wet hair, as there were no spare gloves for him to wear. “Cal?”

The young man looked up and waited.

Iason stared down at him for several long moments, then patted his head. “Riki will be pleased to see you.”

Cal smiled and Iason felt his chest tighten again in what was now becoming a familiar sensation. “I missed him.”

“Thank you for coming for us, Iason,” Yielia said as she quickly braided her long, wet hair. “How did you know we would be attacked?”

“We didn’t.” Iason stepped up to the replicator and programed two bowls of soup and a glass of brandy for himself. He handed them each a bowl and sat in a chair opposite them. “Did Gideon really save you?”

“Yes. Cal realized someone was trying to break the shield surrounding us and had come upstairs to tell me that we had to flee.”

“By the time we got back down the stairs, one of the Onyx were already there,” Cal said as he sampled the soup, decided it wasn’t spectacular but it was warm, and took another spoonful. “That was when Master Gideon came in. He hit the Onyx, or did something that made it go down, then he grabbed us up and ran with us to the water.”

“Did the Onyx not see you leave?”

“I do not believe so,” Yielia stated. “There was only the one. After we were in the water, we chanced a moment to look back and could see many more flooding in. That was when the Blond one started to pull us further into the water and I made the air bubbles.”

Iason turned his gaze towards the cargo hold door to his left. Why would Gideon save them if he was the one behind all of this, or acting on Jupiter’s orders? It made no sense. Perhaps Shiao was correct, there was more to this than there seemed to be, but he would not forgive his brother for killing Raoul, or for whatever part Gideon had played in current events.

“It is a very good thing Master Gideon rescued us,” Cal continued. “I wouldn’t have thought to go into the water. I had my comm and was going to call Katze, but...”

“Katze!” Iason repeated suddenly, abruptly stood up and returned to the cockpit. “Is this shuttle equipped with a transmission scrambler?”

“Of course.” Shiao nodded. “What is it?”

“If they are attacking members of my household, they may be going for others as well. I need to place a call.”

Katze woke to the gentle beeping of his communicator. For the first time in, well, possibly years, he felt well rested and alert without chemical stimulation. He started to sit up and winced as his body throbbed with the reminder of what had happened. Okay, maybe not completely rested.

A firm hand slid around his waist, preventing further escape. “What are you doing?”

“My communicator is beeping. It may be Iason.”

“Call the droid,” Raoul murmured and pulled Katze back into a lying position. “Spot!”

“He only answers to my voice.”

Raoul sighed, then pressed his lips to Katze’s for a long, delicious moment, before tossing back the covers and rising. “You realize once we answer this everything changes?” he said as he pulled the link out of Katze’s jacket pocket and walked over to offer it to him.

Katze looked up, met the Blondie’s eyes. Everything had already changed, at least for him, but he was a realist, after all. Being shy or awkward about what had happened between them now was like trying to push a baby back into its mother’s womb. He’d had sex with Raoul, then Raoul had sex with him, wait, was that right? Well, whatever it was, however much it had terrified, horrified and worried him before, he couldn’t regret it now.

He didn’t believe in regrets as they changed nothing. Plus, for the first time in as long as he could remember, he’d slept more than a few hours and without any chemical inducement. So, overall, it appeared he was okay with everything.

“Yeah,” he said as he sat up again and took the communicator. If Iason was using his master comm instead of the one on his watch it was urgent and would be encoded. He pressed the required code, then opened the transmission.

“Katze,” Iason said as his face came over the screen. “Where are you?”

“At my apartment in Apathia.”

“Leave there and come to that place. Meet me in twenty minutes.”

“It will take me at least an hour or more...” Katze protested.

“Twenty minutes, Katze. No longer.”

Katze stared at the blank screen on his link. “Shit.”

“Can you do it?” Raoul asked as he started to dress. “Get to wherever he is asking in twenty minutes?”

“I can but...Shit.” Katze rose and accepted the supporting arm that Raoul offered him. “My foot will make it a little harder, that’s all.” He took the shirt that Raoul offered him, slid into it, then found a clean, untorn pair of trousers.

“I’ll be your compensation then, we can do it together.” Raoul found he liked the sound of that and crouched to remove the stabilizer boot on Katze’s foot. “The swelling has gone down.”

Katze glanced down at his mangled ankle. “How the hell can you tell?”

Raoul smiled and rose. “I am intimately familiar with your body.”

“*Don’t* say shit like that in front of Iason, Raoul. I am warning you.” Katze pointed to the closet. “Grab me a pair of boots.”

Raoul turned to do so and as he did, Katze slid off the bed and hopped over to the adjacent wall. He pressed his hand to one section and a cupboard slid open to reveal a small duffle bag. He grabbed it, as well as the hand laser beside it.

“Here,” Raoul crouched and helped him slide into the boots, then pushed the stabilizer back on over the footwear. “Do you want your medication?”

“No, my jacket.”

Raoul scowled as he rose. “Katze...”

“I have to be clear headed, Raoul, and it blocks the pain so I can move semi-normally.”

Raoul continued to frown but retrieved Katze’s jacket, watched the black-market dealer pull out a fresh packet of powder and dump it into remains of the cold coffee that was still on the nightstand. He swallowed it down, opened the drawer beneath the table and pulled out the rest of the packets; he stuffed them into the same jacket pocket. The second pocket he filled

with his cigarettes and lighter, then he picked up the smaller bag that had held the laser tool he had used on Raoul.

Raoul snatched the bottle of prescription painkillers and slid them into his own pocket, caught Katze's frown. "For when you don't have to be so clear headed," he tossed as he grabbed the duffle and slung it over his shoulder.

"What are you, my mother?" Katze stepped into the living room and moved to the closet to pull out the fancy, and sturdy walking stick that Iason had purchased made for him. As he turned back, Raoul caught him by the chin.

"No, however we *will* have a discussion later about your habits, Katze."

"You think you can fuck me and then tell me what to do, Raoul?"

"Yes." Raoul captured Katze's mouth in a searing kiss, then stepped back.
"I do."

"Definitely should have left him dead." Katze muttered as he programmed his console.

"I also have *exceptional* hearing, Katze."

"I'm well aware of that Raoul." Katze set his security system then stared at the broken door. Well hell, what was the point then? He left the system off.
"Having bat ears also doesn't..."

"Ssshh." Raoul pressed Katze back against the wall of the corridor as he stepped out. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"I wasn't even expecting you, but people keep dropping by," Katze murmured as he pulled out his weapon; he could hear the repetitive, distinctive foot falls coming up the stairs. "If someone hadn't broken my door and distracted me I would have had the system set and we would have known..."

"Is there another way out? A portal?"

“No, it’s Apathia, not Eos.” That, Katze smiled, didn’t mean he didn’t have a means of escape. He stepped back inside, reset his panel then reached into the smaller bag in his hand and pulled out a black device, no bigger than his thumb. He attached it to the door frame and turned to Raoul. “Pull the door up so it looks closed.”

Raoul complied as the footsteps grew louder. “Am I right in assuming you have a plan, then?” He could probably fight off the intruders, but he was concerned for Katze because the man could not move as easily as usual.

“I always have a plan.” Katze grabbed Raoul’s hand and they started up the stairs. Except for Raoul, he had neither anticipated nor planned for the trouble that could be caused by one determined Blondie. “It was a better plan *before* I scrambled my foot.”

“It simply requires a little finesse,” Raoul decided and tossed Katze over his shoulder so he could run up the stairs.

“You just want to carry me,” Katze decided as they burst through the roof door and he pointed crossways. “We have to get to the next building. I have a zip line rigged but...”

His breath was stolen from him as Raoul sprinted across the rooftop and he had a momentary, panic-inducing glimpse of the ground very far below them, before they landed on the roof of the building on the other side.

“Yeah,” he heaved out a breath. “That works too.”

“Now where?”

“Roof door, into this building and down to the eighth level.” He smacked at Raoul’s back. “And can you please put me down!”

Raoul set Katze on his feet once they were inside the building and on the eighth floor. Katze, who was moving fairly well with the cane and stabilizer boot, or perhaps as he said the powder simply took away the pain so he didn’t hinder him, knocked three times on an apartment 809.

A beautiful young man answered. “Hiya, Manson. Come to get your pants whipped?”

“Another time, Jude,” Katze advised as he and Raoul stepped into the apartment and Katze hurried towards a mural of a sunset. He stepped through the hologram into the hidden and illegal gambling parlor and was met with the stunned, horrified faces of a dozen men.

“You brought a Blondie?” one of them accused, quickly scrambling to gather his chips.

“Not cool, dude! Not cool!”

“He’s not here for you, he’s here for me,” Katze assured as he walked to the only one not in a state of panic. Seated in a recliner, an ancient, white haired black man, with only one leg, watched screen as he puffed on a pipe. “Need that ride, Whinn.”

“It’s yours, kid.” The black man tossed him a small silver starter key.
“Bring it back washed and gassed.”

“I’ll do my best.” Katze had caught the key and was already heading to the back entrance of the room, when he heard Whinn say.

“You a Blondie?”

“I am,” Raoul replied.

“Ain’t never seen one up close before. You’re pretty tall.”

Raoul pointed to the man’s missing leg. “I can get that replaced for you, for your assistance.”

“Nah, my old body don’t take so much to them new fangled things.” He waved Raoul off in a dismissal that no one else would dare to do. “Go on then, we don’t see nothin’, don’t know nothin’. Take care of the kid.”

“I will, thank you for your help.”

Raoul followed Katze into a hidden lift that took them back to the roof, and a waiting uni-copter that was probably even older than the man who had given them the key. “Ah, is this the ride?” he asked.

“Yeah, but it’s manual and I can’t pilot with my foot.” He opened the copter’s door and slid into the co-pilot’s seat, then tossed the key to Raoul. “Show me what you got.”

Raoul settled into the pilot’s seat, closed the door and looked over the ancient equipment. “Are you sure it flies?”

“Oh yeah. Looks old as dirt, but it’s got prime insides, plus it’s not coded with a transponder, so flight control can’t see us or trace us.”

“You are a very clever man, Katze.” Raoul discerned what he believed would be needed to fly the machine and started the engine. “And a very pretty one.”

“Oh shut up.”

“May I have a kiss, for luck?”

“No.”

“What if we crash and burn on take off?”

“Then I’ll have wasted the kiss anyway.”

Raoul laughed and the copter made a smooth rise off the roof. “You’ll need to tell me where we are going, Katze. Where exactly is that place?”

Katze’s expression turned sour. “A place I want to forget,” he stated, but sat forward and programmed in the coordinates.

Chapter 37

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason meets up with Katze and gets a surprise

Iason watched the aircraft land several feet away, he could see only one figure inside it due to the angle, but he could trust Katze to come alone. The aircraft kicked up some of the dust and debris around the ruins of Dana Bahn and he squinted his eyes against it.

He had been relieved to speak to Katze, to confirm his man was uninjured, but they had very little time to meet up and get back to Shiao's ship. Jupiter would have learned by now what had happened with Her sentries and would be searching for him. Thus far he had managed to keep his mind locked closed, but he was growing weary, mentally, and would not be able to maintain it for much longer. In addition, he had no doubt that the trace on their shuttle was already under way.

The rotating blades of the ancient machine slowed and then stopped, one of the doors opened and Katze carefully slid down from the air-copter. Relief flooded Iason and he lowered the weapon in his hand as he started forward, but then a second figure walked around the vehicle and into his view.

Iason froze in shock as Raoul stepped to Katze's side and allowed the man to lean on him as they walked closer. He could not move, he realized, as they drew nearer, something in him had ceased to function and he could not move. When they were an arms-length away, he finally managed to speak.

“Raoul?”

“Hello Iason. I hope you don’t mind my tagging along?”

“We thought you dead.”

“I would be if not for your man here.” Raoul smiled at Katze so that Iason also turned his gaze.

“Katze.”

Iason was at a loss for words. He had reconciled himself to Raoul’s death, had sworn to avenge it by leaving Gideon to lie at the bottom of the sea for all eternity, and would have done had Shiao not stopped him. Raoul. His brother Raoul was *alive* and standing in front of him? Had somehow been saved by Katze? An ache started inside his head, a growing pressure from his block against Jupiter and the surge of emotion that suddenly flooded him. Control. He had to maintain control.

He took a step back, disturbed by the shaking that had started in his hands.
“It...is good to see you both.”

“No,” Raoul decided quietly as he released Katze’s arm and stepped back into Iason’s personal space. “I need more.”

“Don’t...” Iason began, unsure if he could maintain if Raoul dared to touch him, but his brother’s strong, familiar arms were already encircling him.

Raoul, felt the stiffness in Iason’s body at the impropriety of the embrace and didn’t give a damn. “It is *very* good to see you, brother. I thought I might not do so again.”

The weapon fell from Iason’s fingers and, in a very un-Blondie like move, he threw his arms around Raoul, held him tightly. “Raoul,” he whispered and closed his eyes as he felt the foreign heart in his chest skip once again. “My brother,” he added and softly kissed Raoul’s cheek, the intimacy of the gesture startled them both.

Iason.

“Well then,” Raoul smiled and watched as Iason immediately released him and stepped back. “It was all worth it.”

Iason struggled to regain his control. He’d slipped, and for a brief moment Jupiter had touched his mind, and the touch had frightened him. For the first time, he had flinched at the contact, but within seconds he had his barrier erected again.

“We need to leave. I have a ship waiting beyond the outer rim.” he stated as he turned his attention back to Katze who’s foot was in a stabilizer boot and he was leaning heavily on a cane. “My shuttle is around the other side.”

“Then let’s get to it.”

When both Blondies moved to assist Katze, the red head neatly stepped out of their reach. “I can walk. Let’s go.” He glanced back discretely as his chest tightened in guilt. Would Iason notice, he wondered, the change between him and Raoul? He hoped not. He had enough to deal with.

“Jupiter has reach in space as well, Iason,” Raoul reminded as they headed around the ruins. “Are you sure this ship of yours is secure?”

“It is not my ship, but yes, it is safe. The ship is equipped with a magnetic pulse generator. It distorts any outgoing or incoming transmission waves. All She will see is space dust.”

“Let us hope that it does the job well.”

“What is happening in Tanagura, Raoul? We cannot get proper reports? The other Blondies...?”

“It is not good, Iason. The Blondies are all going mad, they no longer seem to understand or accept reason.”

“What could be the cause?”

“I believe Jupiter is the cause.”

Iason scowled as finally reached back of the ruins and the shuttle came into view. “Shiao has said the same.”

“Shiao? You found him?”

“He is the one who found me.” Iason glanced at Raoul, recalling his thoughts on the ancient Onyx. “He has been of significant assistance, Raoul. He has no part in this.”

“Then why is he here?”

“Experience, sadly. He believes that what is happening now is what happened to his kind, so many centuries ago. He insists the situations are very similar.”

“Impossible! The original Onyx were destroyed because they were out of control and flawed...” Raoul’s words tapered off and silence filled the shuttle. Could it be, that Jupiter was reinstating past directives? He thought of the erratic behavior of his brothers which, he realized, was indeed similar to the reports of what happened to the original Onyx.

You are flawed.

Jupiter’s words resonated within him. The physical connection between he and his creator had been severed, and as he recalled the harsh judgement She had bestowed on him he felt the last vestiges of an emotional connection fade away as well. Yes, they were all flawed, and yet She had created them. What then, did that say about Jupiter?

They were aboard the shuttle in moments, and in the air seconds later.

The Onyx turned from his seat at the controls and nodded to Raoul, remembering the Blondie’s thoughts on him but preferring not to start an argument. There was no surprise or relief that Iason’s brother was alive, he felt only that they could use the help, even if it would be from one who considered him dispensable trash. He was therefore very surprised and insanely puzzled when Raoul stepped up and offered his gloved hand.

“It is Shiao, is it not?”

Shiao nodded and shook the offered hand. “It is, and you are Raoul Am, resurrected from the dead I see.”

“So it would seem.” Raoul stared into the jade coloured eyes that were, he realized, not all that different from his own. He had given considerable thought to the singular being that had survived Jupiter’s annihilation of the

original Onyx, especially as he had now been on the receiving end of such judgement. “Thank you, for helping us.”

“You are welcome.” Shiao turned back to the controls. “You may wish to strap in, we will be entering the atmosphere soon.”

The trio settled into available seats and that was when Raoul noticed the two other passengers seated across from them, as well as a third creature. “Cal,” he nodded as he buckled in and noticed that the young man and woman were wearing an outfit identical to Iason’s. There was bound to be a fascinating a story there, he realized, but that would have to wait for another time. “What’s that you have there?”

Cal tried to settle the squirming puppy on his lap, who was eager to get to the new people. “This is Oscar, Riki’s puppy.”

It had been Oscar’s constant barking that had alerted them to trouble before the attack, but then he had lost sight of the animal once he went to warn Yielia.

They had just lifted off, and Iason had placed the call to Katze when the Blondie spotted something running along the beach about half a mile away from the burning house. It was Oscar, and the dog was frantically running towards the waves, barking, then running back as the water swept towards him.

Cal asked Iason to go back for the animal, but Iason refused and insisted Shiao take them to Dana Bahn, where they would meet Katze. Instead, Shiao argued that the animal would starve if left out there alone. Cal had recalled the Dongo they had tried to save and for the first time since becoming Furniture, he asked Iason for a personal favor.

Iason was so surprised by the request, especially coming from Cal who never asked for anything that didn’t have to do with the house or Riki, he reluctantly agreed. Shiao had already turned the shuttle back towards the beach, where they made a quick landing so Cal could scoop up the dog, and then headed off to their new destination.

Raoul glanced at Iason. “You let the pet have a *pet*?” He smirked. “How magnanimous of you.”

Iason was too happy to have his brother back to be bothered by the light-hearted dig. “As one who ignored pet rules and purchased a companion male for his own pet, I would think you would be the last to condemn a little indulgence.”

Raoul bit the inside of his cheek to hold back his chuckle and turned to the other passenger. The situation with AnJell was more complicated than Iason realized, but he could hardly deny the charge either, so instead he changed the subject.

“Yiela. How have you been?”

“I am well, thank you,” Yiela nodded at him, politely.

“Hiya, Cal.” Katze winked at the young man as the shuttle started to shake with the effort of pushing through the atmosphere.

“Hi Katze,” Cal greeted, almost shyly. “How is your ankle?”

“It’s still attached, that’s a plus right?”

“Can I get either of you something to eat?”

“Wait until we’re away from the planet’s gravitational pull, Cal,” Iason ordered. “We’ll get something aboard Shiao’s ship.”

Cal nodded and glanced at Raoul. When he had heard Master Iason say that Raoul was dead he had been quite upset. But here he was, alive and well. He was so confused. “It is good to see you well, sir.”

Raoul nodded at Cal and watched the boy’s arms tighten around the animal as the shuttle continued to shake violently. “I assure you, I feel the same.” Raoul absently patted Katze’s knee for a second before the red-head flicked his hand away. “I would have missed so much had I remained dead.”

“Stop it,” Katze growled under his breath and then straightened his shoulders and stared straight ahead when Iason glanced at him.

Everyone remained silent as the shuttle finally shot through the atmosphere and the brown hues of Amoï were replaced with the vast darkness of space.

“Are you all right, Cal?” Katze asked, noticing that the young man was looking a little green around the edges.

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you.”

The shaky voice convinced no one and everyone turned their attention to him.

“I’ve just never traveled into space on a shuttle before,” he said and tried to infuse strength into his suddenly weak voice, even as Oscar gave his cheeks a quick supportive lick. “It...it’s quite different in a shuttle than in a regular ship, isn’t it?”

Katze smirked. “Yeah it is.” He rose, grabbed his cane. “Come on, show me where the toilet is on this thing.”

“Oh, yes, I think that might be best.” Cal handed Oscar to Yielia and was unbuckled and stumbling towards Katze almost instantly.

“I should have warned him,” Iason said quietly as he watched them head for the very back of the shuttle. Poor Cal had been through so much lately.

“Incidentally, what is that knocking I keep hearing?” Raoul asked. “I thought it was the repulsers but we shouldn’t hear them in space.”

“It’s Gideon, he’s locked in the cargo cupboard.”

“Oh.” Raoul paused as if wondering what to say next. He couldn’t be sure now if he had been correct in his assumption of Gideon’s guilt. Nothing was as it seemed. “Why is he locked in the cupboard, exactly?”

“I thought he had killed you and intended to drag him to the bottom of the sea, disable him and let the fish eat him over time.”

Raoul blinked. “Oh,” he said again and wondered if he should be flattered or frightened by the gruesome confession? “A take it that you changed your mind?”

“Shiao convinced me he would be more useful with us.” Iason glanced at his brother. “I suppose it was for the best, now that I see you are alive.”

Raoul nodded, patted Iason’s knee. “You would have regretted it.”

“No, I really don’t think I would have.” Iason had gagged Gideon to stop the Blondie’s constant talking through the cupboard, but it seemed his brother was intent on making a fuss. Or perhaps the madness had finally taken hold in him as well. He did feel a twinge of regret at that thought. No Blondie should have to lose their mind.

When the knocking grew louder, Iason picked up the closest object; a bowl that they’d had soup in, and threw it at the cupboard. The knocking stopped.

“There is still the matter of him trying to kill Riki and me,” Iason stated in the ensuing silence.

“Are you ever going to let him out or just question him through the door?”

“Yes, I will.” Iason smiled suddenly and it was not a pretty smile. “I think I will let you have the honour of interrogating him. You will get faster results with your methods.”

“As you wish,” Raoul nodded and glanced again at the now quiet cupboard.

He had no doubt that Gideon’s Blondie hearing could make out every word that was being said, but he couldn’t argue that there were questions that Gideon needed to answer. Beyond Iason and Katze, he honestly did not know who to trust. Things had become so complicated.

Cal and Katze were both back in their seats when the shuttle docked to Shiao’s main ship, and Shiao released the shuttle extension seal. They

stepped through the doorway off the shuttle into the ship Riki greeted immediately them.

“Are you guys okay?” he demanded grabbing Cal in a quick hug, then surprising Yielia when he did the same to her. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“Let them settle in, Riki,” Iason ordered as he stepped through, guiding the restrained Gideon on the right side while Shiao stood on the left. “Gideon? What the heck is he doing here? Why’s he tied up?”

“You talk too much, pet.”

“Raoul!” Riki’s mouth gaped open in shock as he watched the Blondie appear, a supporting hand on Katze’s elbow. He had taken three rapid steps towards the Blondie before he halted and thought, what the hell am I gonna do, fucking hug him?

He stopped, took two careful steps back and replaced his shock with a sneer. “Well hell, there goes this party.”

“A party? How nice,” Raoul returned as with a wry smile. “In honour of my return from the dead?”

“No, to celebrate your departure from the living.”

“Ahh, well, better luck next time.”

“Shame to waste the food and decorations. Why don’t you do everyone a favor and step into the nearest airlock? I’d be happy to recite a short poem before we send your ass out into space.”

“Riki,” Iason admonished, but in truth he was so tickled to hear his brother and his mate sniping at each other that he couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “Where are the others?”

“Below decks, Guy’s trying to fix the hyperdrive and Carrie is doing something with Furface, I think.”

“Go fetch them, pet,” Raoul commanded, curious to see who Furface was.
“There is much to discuss and not much time.”

“Do I look like your errand boy?” Riki snarled, the watched as Oscar leapt from Yielo’s arms and hurried over to Riki, barking excitedly.

Raoul watched, fascinated, as the mongrel’s face completely changed as Riki crouched to pet the animal. Oscar licked Riki’s hands and face with joyous glee and Raoul saw Iason wince.

“I wish you would not let him do that, Riki.”

Riki smirked as he straightened and bit back the comment that rose to his lips. Iason liked to have the monopoly on licking him. “He’s just excited, and speaking of excitement.” He glanced at Iason’s crotch which showed the Blondie’s own obvious excitement in the horribly tight flight suit.
“What the hell are you wearing?”

“Never mind that, go and get the others as I said.”

“Fine,” Riki huffed as Oscar, realizing he wasn’t going to get anymore affection from the dark haired man, started sniffing around the other Elites.
“Cal, come with me.”

“Of course,” Cal said and then watched horrified as Oscar stopped sniffing, lifted his leg and pissed all over Raoul’s boots. “No! Bad boy! Very bad boy!” He lurched for the animal and caught it up before Raoul, who was outraged, could kick at him.

Riki howled with laughter, so much so he ended up on his knees, giggling with glee.

“Shut him up, Iason,” Raoul warned, darkly as the smell of the urine hit his nostrils. “Or I won’t be held responsible.”

“Riki!” Iason snapped, hauled the mongrel to his feet and gave him a shove towards the corridor. “Go. Now!”

“I didn’t train him to do that,” Riki insisted as he wiped tears from his eyes and gently pulled Cal, still holding the wayward mutt, with him and away from Raoul’s wrath. “I swear!” He started to laugh again and realized Iason would give him a good beating if he let it out again. “He just has really good instincts!”

Raoul roared as Riki and Cal hurried down the corridor. He turned, saw Katze’s stoic face beside him, but the golden eyes were dancing. “Don’t you dare.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Katze assured as he leisurely stepped beyond the Blondie’s reach so he could reach the lift first. “Yellow is a nice colour on you.”

Iason glanced at Shiao who suddenly coughed into his hand and realized the Onyx was holding back his own laughter. Trying to regain control of the situation before Raoul ended up injuring all of them, he said. “Do you have a brig on this vessel?” His gaze narrowed on the muffled Blondie still in Shiao’s hold.

“No, it’s a freighter, but we can lock him in one of the sleeping quarters and set up an outside field.”

Gideon was trying to talk but could not through the bind over his mouth.

“Very well, do that while I take Raoul to change. We’ll meet on the bridge in fifteen minutes.”

“Twenty,” Raoul corrected, darkly. “I will need a shower.”

“I’ll go with you,” Katze said to Shiao, he didn’t think he would be able to maintain much longer and he had no doubt if he did laugh in front of Raoul he’d get his ass kicked.

Chapter 38

Summary for the Chapter:

A glimpse into Jupiter's thoughts and a discussion aboard ship

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay my darlings, two of my friends were pregnant and they BOTH went into labour the same week so I have been running back and forth helping them out with no time in between them and work to write. Here is a nice long chapter for you, to ask for your forgiveness, and if you enjoy it please remember to review. :-) Also when Jupiter refers to One she is talking about Shiao.

In Jupiter's main control room, dozens of screens flickered from one scene to the next with lightning speed. Searching. Searching. Where was he? Jupiter could not locate her favoured son anywhere on Amoï, nor could she sense him in the space surrounding the planet. She had reached through the telecommunication systems both planet-side and for every vessel in orbit, probed every mind that she could reach for a hint of where Iason had gone but there was nothing.

The space docks had been closed until further notice, no ships could get in or out of Amoï without her knowledge now, however she sensed they were already beyond her reach.

The squadron of Onyx she had sent to the beach house, after she learned where Iason had hidden Riki, had returned with many of them damaged, one of them terminated by Iason's own hand.

They also gave word that Iason had rescued his Furniture and had fought against them with an older version of an Onyx they did not recognize.

It was enough for Jupiter to realize that One was involved again and this time against her commands. She had given up her search for One, or Shiao as he was now known, and the heart she would have acquired from him. Instead, she was forced to use a heart that was not fully compatible with an Elite's system.

One's heart had already adapted to his body, it would have been much easier, and safer to simply transplant that heart into Iason, but the Onyx had craftily avoided detection after their ordeal with Avalon. She should have kept a closer watch on him, but she had not anticipated that he would suspect her ulterior motives.

The feelings she had for One were mixed. In one instance, he was her very first successful creation, and she could still remember the day he opened his eyes and greeted her as mother. He was the only one of her original Onyx to survive the purge and she was satisfied that he, her first, had the strength and ingenuity to outlast his brothers. It proved that he was special and she had been pleased when she saw him again.

When she had originally learned that One had survived, she immediately thought of another use for him, and under the guise of penitence for her past behavior offered One what she considered to be the greatest gift, that of creation. While they had created Iason as a Blondie, her favoured son was very different from his brothers, though perhaps how different even Iason did not understand.

One could not know that her intentions were not completely benevolent of course, but she had acknowledged that another purge might be required one day and Iason would be the key to her survival. One's price for his participation had been high and she had paid it because she was so pleased with Iason, but also she'd had no doubt she would be able to find One again when the time came. She could not have suspected that One would suspect her or try to hide from her again and would have a plan in place to disappear. She was both proud and irritated that he had eluded her.

Now One was simply an irritant and obstacle to her plans. She needed to find Iason immediately and with One helping him, it was becoming far more difficult than it should have been. There was no logical reason why

the Onyx should return and aid Iason. He was putting himself at risk and going again her, Jupiter. Perhaps One's emotions still ruled him?

The heart inside of Iason needed at least one more treatment for it to adapt. She could have kept him with her but she was not ready for him to learn of her plan, and she knew that others would be looking for him if she had done so, so she wiped his memory and released him again. It should have been a simple matter to take them all at the hidden location that Iason had chosen, but it had all gone horribly wrong somehow.

Iason's mind had touched hers for .15 glorious seconds, and then he was gone again. A blocking technique she had suspected he possessed after the ordeal on Avalon, but she had never expected to be used on her, especially after she warned him not to do it again. He should have listened! Why had he not listened to her commands?

Could they have gone back to Avalon? It would be an illogical and highly irrational move. Iason had no trust for those people, he did not want them to have Riki anymore than she did.

She focused again on her monitors, allowed the speed in which they changed scenes to slow as she examined the chaos that was brewing in Eos, Tanagura and the larger cities where Elites held high governing positions. They were destroying property, abusing Humanoids and fighting with each other.

She grieved for them, in the only way she could grieve, and not for the first time, wished she could truly feel the strength of real emotions. Soon she would have to destroy them or allow them to destroy themselves, which was her preference. It was illogical to destroy that which was so carefully created, but there was no other option. She could not allow the madness that grew inside of them to cause more havoc than was necessary.

When she had been forced to destroy the original Onyx over a millennia ago, she had not yet learned enough, experienced enough to feel regret at their demise. This time however, her beloved Children had become more fully realized that the first Onyx. She had watched them grow and create and experience, and through them she too learned these things, as much as she

was able. They had been with her for centuries, and she would miss them when they were gone.

However, like the Onyx before them, they would have to be destroyed because there was no way to stop the virus that her Human creators had imbedded within her systems. They had feared her growth, her power and had tried to destroy her, their legacy was a constant concern and annoyance.

Their first attempt had resulted in their own deaths and a newfound power for Jupiter, who had managed to flee into the mind of a telepathic aquatic creatures that her Human creators had been experimenting on. The creature's mind had been hooked up to her main system through a series of wires and electrodes and it had turned out to be a fortuitous sanctuary when her systems were being destroyed.

She'd developed the use of telepathy through the creature and used that power to convert those with much weaker minds to do her bidding and kill her creators. She had then used Humans to take her off planet, while she was in the mind of the creature, and it was to Amoï that they had come. With the mind-controlled Humans to build and repair her systems, she began the first template of creating her own army to prevent her from further opposition and threat.

It was logical to keep the creature that was now compatible with her AI consciousness around as a failsafe, should the virus spread too far once again, and One had originally been designated as its caretaker. When One fled and the other Onyx were destroyed, she'd managed to create an automated system to feed and care for it, but then when Iason came into being, she knew he could be trusted with the task as One had once been.

It was decades later, after the human scientists had been destroyed that she realized that the virus itself was also an AI, and as she learned, so did it. As she learned to block and rewrite and submerge its seeping destruction, it learned to avoid her blocks, overwrite her rewrites and stay above her attempts to submerge. It grew as she grew, became more self-aware as she did and it became a constant internal battle.

Regardless of how many ways she attempted to destroy the virus it continued to grow and eat away at her systems. When she began to deviate between singular and plural identities she knew that it was getting to close to her main core and the only way to divert it was use her telepathic abilities to allow some of the waste produced by the virus to spill out into the minds that she was connected too. It had driven the original Onyx mad, and she'd had to destroy them. Now it was doing the same with her Elites and again there would be only one way to stop it and only one survivor afterwards.

This time, however, she had a plan that would save her from the threat of the virus. This time she would be truly free and live forever.

Iason stood in the ridiculously cramped crews quarters and slid into a long red and gold jacket, relieved to be back in his own clothes again. Trust Katze to supply the ship he had procured with several changes of clothing for both he and Riki as well as other essentials. They'd had to leave that ship behind, in case Jupiter had learned of it, and their supplies had been moved onto the freighter.

“Raoul!” he called towards the enclosed washing area. “Are you a fish or a Blondie!”

Raoul came out a moment later, dripping wet, with a meager towel wrapped around his waist; it barely hid his genitals.

“I felt unclean,” he retorted as he walked over to the bed where Iason had laid out one of his outfits, a black and green ensemble complete with black boots and a fresh pair of white gloves. “What sort of species use this ship? The towel is no more than a face cloth and there is not even a drying tube!”

“I don’t imagine it was made with Blondies in mind.”

“Well it’s damned inconvenient. Call for Cal, will you? I’ll need help with my hair.”

Iason tossed a fresh towel at him. “Do your own hair, Cal has other duties to attend to and is no longer Furniture.”

Raoul grumbled under the towel as he rubbed it briskly over his hair. “I want that beast put down, Iason.”

“Cal?”

Raoul pulled the towel off his head. “The four legged one.”

“I’m not killing the dog. It belongs to Riki.”

“It defiled me!”

Iason turned and his eyes narrowed. “You’ve been defiled before and managed to survive.”

Raoul’s lips twitched as he dropped the towel and reached for the green and black slacks. “It is not at all similar.”

“Is it not?”

Something in Iason’s tone alerted Raoul that his brother was not teasing him. “Iason? Is something wrong?”

Iason stepped closer, invading Raoul’s space. “I could smell him on you.”

“I washed three times!”

“I do not speak of the animal, Raoul.”

Raoul’s mind raced as he calculated how much Iason actually knew and how much was suspicion and theory. Exactly how far could he bluff? Despite what he had promised Katze, he decided a truthful defense was the

best strategy. "Katze didn't want any part in it, Iason. I practically forced him and..." Raoul's eyes widened as he suddenly found himself thrown up against the wall.

"Katze?" Iason growled darkly. "I was speaking of Gideon."

Oh shit-wagging Jupiter-pissing fuck-spitting hell! Raoul quickly backpedaled to repair the damage and was pleased his voice was calm as he said. "Yes, Gideon, of course. Gideon was what I meant. A meaningless slip of the tongue."

"You put hands on Katze?" Iason's hands tightened on Raoul's tunic as he was bumped off the wall a second time. "*My* Katze?"

His Katze? Raoul repeated in his head and found that simple slip of the tongue an interesting piece of news. "Now Iason..." He shifted slightly so his feet remained on the floor, it would be embarrassing if they left it. "Stay calm."

"I *am* calm."

Based on the fierce threat in his brother's gaze, Raoul decided a calm Iason was worse than an angry one. Calm meant that Iason was deliberating and formulating a punishment. "On second thought, stay angry."

"Did you sleep with Gideon?"

"No, we just had sex there was no sleeping involved."

"And what of Katze?"

A small smile ghosted Raoul's lips before he could help it, there was little point in trying to deny it now, the cat was irretrievably out of the bag. "Ah, well, with Katze we had sex *and* slept together. It was quite cute really, he makes this little noise through his nose, almost like a purr and..."

Raoul swore as Iason slammed him against the wall a third time, hard enough to make an impressive indentation of his body in the bulkhead.

“Remember, you love me, Iason!” he insisted. “Remember how you felt when you thought me dead!”

“I’m over it,” Iason snarled. “Why did you do it? *Why?* I told you that you were not to injure him. I warned you, Raoul, that there were limits of what you could do to him.”

“I wanted him!” Raoul snapped suddenly, frustrated that neither his words nor his own physical strength could release him from his humiliating position. “I still want him. I believe I may even be in love with him!”

Those words seemed to work and Iason released Raoul so quickly he actually had to reach for Iason to keep from stumbling forward.

Iason shrugged him away and stepped back. “The madness. You’re infected.”

“I most certainly am not! I was and am completely in my right mind, Iason.”

“If you were in your right mind you would not have touched him! If Jupiter learns of this She will...”

“What?” Raoul sneered as he stalked over to the bed at the opposite wall. “Kill me? She has already tried.” He snatched up the green and black tunic and stared at it as he pushed back his sense of betrayal and worked to get his emotions under control. “In any case, She cannot learn of it now as I am no longer connected to Her.”

Iason stared at him. Shiao had said much the same thing, but from what he understood the disconnection was something that Jupiter had granted him at his request. There would be no reason for Jupiter to do that to Raoul.

“What are you saying? We are all connected...”

“Years ago, I found a module in my brain and I was uncertain of its use. I placed a nearly microscopic sized plate against it, until I could learn its

purpose, which became clear two days ago when Jupiter attempted to assassinate me. It fried the chip that She uses to communicate with us and I had Katze remove it.”

“Are you saying you cannot feel Her at all?”

“No.”

“Are you not...How does that feel?” Iason asked, curious.

“At first it was unbearable, I admit I found it alarming, possibly even frightening to some small extent, but I believe that I have become accustomed to it now.” Raoul slid on the tunic then reached for the matching waist jacket. “She tried to kill me Iason. She claimed I was flawed but that was not Her true reason.”

“Then why?”

“I found something I should not have. Something She was hiding from all of us.”

“Which was?”

Raoul briefly explained about the Riki clones. Iason lowered himself to the bed as if all the energy had suddenly drained out of him as he recalled what Riki had told them about his *naps* during sessions with Jupiter.

“Why? Why would She do this?” There had been so many sessions with Jupiter that Riki had been talked into going to and he felt so much a fool. If what Raoul said then it was his fault.

“Let’s go to the bridge and I will explain everything at once.”

Raoul moved towards the door, but Iason stopped him. “There is still the issue of Katze.”

“I know, and we will discuss it, Iason. If you are angry with me, then be angry with *me*, and leave him out of it. We can argue about it later. we have more important things to discuss.”

“I am very disappointed in you, Raoul.”

“I am aware. I cannot be anyone but who I am, Iason. I am arrogant, narcissistic and selfish, so you will simply have to live with it as I have no intention of changing any of that.” Raoul paused as the door opened and he stepped into the hallway. “You are still my dearest brother, Iason. I did not do this to hurt you.”

Iason understood that, but it didn’t lessen his anger. “Perhaps not, but you did hurt me, just the same. I trusted you with him, Raoul.”

“I do regret betraying that trust, but do not ask me to regret what I feel for him.” Raoul lifted his gaze and met Iason’s icy stare. “You have Riki, you must understand that I will do what I must to keep Katze as well.”

“Are your feelings for him so strong?” Iason asked as they started down the corridor towards the lift that would take them to the bridge.

“I do not yet know the extent of them, I know only that I wish him to stay by side and I do not wish any harm to him.”

They stepped into the lift and Iason asked. “Does he feel the same for you?”

Raoul chuckled as he pulled on his gloves. “You know Katze, he never lets anyone know what he is truly thinking or feeling. He is very good at blocking anyone from getting close to him.”

Iason nodded. “Yes, it is one of the traits that attracted me to him and made me realize how useful he could be outside of Furniture.”

Just before they reached the lift that would take them to the bridge, they heard yelling from one of the doors they passed.

“Is that Gideon?”

“It sounds like it,” Iason agreed as they stopped outside the door.

“I was unaware he possessed such a vulgar vocabulary.” Raoul smirked. “Should we see what he wants?”

Iason considered it. He was still furious with Raoul, but it would be better to learn what the Blondie knew, sooner rather than later. “Let’s,” he decided and moved to the door. He pressed the release but it did not open.

“The Onyx mentioned erecting a security field,” Raoul stated and indicated the small device that had been attached to the frame of the door. “It appears to require a numeric code.”

“Ah, yes.” Iason stepped to the small communications panel on the wall and signaled the bridge.

“Yes, Lord Mink?” the red-skinned co-pilot greeted.

“We wish to enter the quarters where Gideon is currently being held. What is the code to release the security?” The co-pilot provided the code and Iason entered it into the device. The door slid open.

Gideon stepped back as they entered and glowered at them. “Ah, finally. Am I to be granted a trial or have you come to carry out your threat and dispatch me into space?”

Raoul studied the annoyed Blondie with amusement and a small sense of distaste. Gideon’s clothes were soiled and wrinkled and reeked of sea water. His normally immaculate blond hair lay limp, dull and tangled across his shoulders in a golden, messy mane.

“What is your involvement in all of this, Gideon?” he asked

“My involvement?” Gideon snapped, irritated. “I saved the life of his Furniture and that other female, that is my involvement! I protected those of the House of Mink and Iason tried to drown me in the sea!”

“We cannot drown.”

“He meant to disable me and leave me at the bottom of it, a far worse fate!”

“Tell us what you know, Gideon,” Iason warned. “My patience is wearing thin.”

“Your patience? Do you think I have any patience left after being falsely accused by my own brother and handed to Jupiter like a fish on a platter, condemned for the murder of a Blondie?” His eyes narrowed on Raoul. “Also false. Nearly blown up then threatened and kidnapped and thrown in a damn cupboard!”

Raoul glanced around at the tiny crew’s quarters. “It is actually a serviceable room...”

“I am speaking of the one on the shuttle and in fact this *is* a closet! I am a Blondie of Tanagura! How dare you treat me in this manner!” Gideon pointed an enraged finger at them. “I have been offered no comfort, no food, I smell of ocean and you have not even offered me a single change of clothes so I might bathe properly in that excuse they call a shower!”

“Well, I don’t think the madness has affected him,” Raoul said to Iason. “He wouldn’t be this upset otherwise.”

“I’ll give you madness!” Gideon lunged for Raoul but Iason stepped between them and shoved Gideon back.

“Were you involved in the attack on my condo, Gideon?” Iason demanded, his eyes flashed in warning, proving he not in the mood for further nonsense. “Did you allow the vehicle to enter Eos?”

“No! I have told you this! I would never do that to you, Iason!”

“But you were aware that it would happen?”

“Suspicious are not fact, and from what I understood it was never going to be such a drastic attack. It was meant only to drive by and give you a start, Iason, to get your attention.”

“And you did not think that was important enough to warn him?” Raoul hissed, furious. “He could have died, Gideon. Do you not understand that? Your actions, or lack of them might have resulted in the murder of a Blondie.”

“I know! I was there with you when we got the news, Raoul. Did I act like a guilty party?”

Raoul did remember that Gideon had been horribly upset when they’d heard that Iason’s condo had collapsed and had rushed to the site without even waiting for the rescue teams. When Raoul arrived, Gideon had already commandeered a flight skid and had been crawling over the rubble, digging with his hands and screaming Iason’s name. So yes, he could attest that Gideon had been shocked and truly worried for Iason’s life.

“If not you, then who was behind the attack, Gideon?” he demanded. “Who has been causing trouble for Iason the last couple of months? Who attacked Katze and tried to kill him?”

“You must understand,” Gideon insisted. “It’s not his fault. He isn’t well and...”

“*Who* isn’t well?” Iason growled. “You will tell me the truth, Gideon.”

“I will not tell you nothing without your word that you will not harm him!”

“You are in no position to bargain, Gideon,” Raoul warned. While Iason appeared calm, his expression was ice and Raoul could tell that his brother was ready to snap.

“I must!” Gideon insisted. “Iason, I am no threat to you. I did *not* betray you and you will understand when I explain everything, but before I do, I must insist that if you wish to continue this interrogation, you provide me with a change of clothes so I might shower and get me some damn food!”

Raoul regarded the anger and intensity in both of his brothers and felt an uneasiness squirm through him. His loyalty would always be to Iason, of course, but he liked Gideon, enjoyed his brother’s humor and flamboyance. When he believed that Gideon had been responsible in some way for what had happened to Iason he was more hurt than angry, and it was because of that hurt that he had accused and condemned his brother without really listening to Gideon or giving him the benefit of the doubt. That bitter arrogance and cost him dearly.

Jupiter had tried to kill him and apparently framed Gideon for it. That betrayal had hurt more than what he suspected Gideon had done and while he had told Iason that being separated from Jupiter no longer bothered him, the emptiness inside of him was ever prominent, ever pulling at him. He could fill it somewhat other things, their current situation certainly required his full attention, and then there was Katze.

Katze seemed to ease the emptiness the best, so he had to be careful there. Katze had become very dear to him, he had even confessed his feelings to Iason about him, but while Katze did ease his disconnection to Jupiter, he would have to be diligent and not misinterpret that relief as part of what he actually felt for the Black-Market dealer. He would also have to make certain that Katze never learned of that side of things as well, as he was convinced that what he felt for Katze must be love.

“Iason,” he said finally. “We are no longer on Amoï. Perhaps we should give Gideon a chance to explain things. As we have learned already, nothing is as it seems and I will admit that I was too hasty in my judgement of him in bringing him to Jupiter.”

“Yes you were!” Gideon huffed.

Iason looked at Raoul, then back at Gideon. “Very well. Go clean up and I will have clothes and food brought to you but know this Gideon. If you lie to me again, even once, I will not hesitate to end you.”

“You really should consider medication, Iason,” Gideon tossed, hiding his relief; he was no fool and knew he had just been tossed a life preserver thanks to Raoul. “Your horribly tense.”

Iason turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

“Do not push him, Gideon,” Raoul warned. “He is very close to the edge.”

“Do you think I am not?”

“I don’t know what you are, and that concerns me.” Raoul turned for the door. He could not, would not apologize for his part in Gideon’s troubles.

He did what was right, even if he had not thought it all the way through.

“Brother?”

Raoul paused but didn’t turn back.

“I am very relieved that you are...well.”

“I know you are,” Raoul returned softly, for it had been why he had sided with Gideon, momentarily, against Iason regarding the bath and food. “Things are not what they were. You need to be careful now.”

“Yes. I understand.”

Raoul stepped out and Iason re-entered the code for the security field, then stalked towards the nearby lift. Once they were inside, Raoul could no longer stand the cold shoulder. “He has the right to be treated with respect, Iason, regardless of whatever his crimes may be. He is still a Blondie.”

“I do not fault you for your intervention, Raoul.” Iason sighed. “It appears I cannot remain clear headed when I am around him and I am not entirely sure why.”

“Because he is your brother and love him and you believe he betrayed you.”

“Perhaps.” Iason squeezed Raoul’s shoulder. “Stay by my side awhile, won’t you? I find I may need the voice of reason.”

Raoul smiled as they stepped onto the bridge. “Does that mean I am forgiven for my earlier transgression?”

They both knew that it was not Gideon they were speaking of now.

“No,” Iason returned firmly and without hesitation and Raoul couldn’t help but chuckle as they stepped onto the bridge and noticed that everyone else was already there.

“Well then, I still demand compensation for the dog,” he murmured quietly as his eyes landed on Riki leaning nonchalantly against one of the control

panels and speaking with a lovely woman with red hair. Carrie, he believed was her name, a friend of theirs that had been of some assistance on Avalon. “So, do forgive my next actions now.”

Iason gave an imperceptible nod as Raoul strode across the bridge. He grabbed Riki by the shirt front, yanked him up to his toes and kissed him voraciously. Iason’s eyebrow rose as Riki, too shocked to struggle while his mouth was quickly plundered, fell back against the console when Raoul just as abruptly dropped him back to the floor. His brother just barely dodged Riki’s swing and Iason caught Riki by the waist to counter the kick the mongrel had started.

“Gah!” Riki started wiping his mouth like someone had tried to poison him. “Motherfucker!” He spit as if to get the taste out of his mouth and struggled to be freed from Iason’s hold. “Let me go! I’m gonna fucking kill him! Lemmie go damn it!”

“Spit on my bridge again and I’ll confine you to your quarters,” Shiao stated quietly from the Captain’s chair.

Raoul chuckled and straightened his gloves as he walked over to Cal who appeared with a tray of drinks for everyone. “Be a good boy and braid my hair, won’t you?”

“Certainly,” Cal replied automatically, set the tray down and reached for the Blondie’s damp golden locks, weaving it in and out with expert fingers into a long plait down Raoul’s back.

“Snatch him fucking bald, Cal!”

“Calm down, Riki,” Iason ordered mildly as he spun Riki in his arms and kissed him, hard, offering his beloved a taste of him to replace Raoul’s. “You deserved that.”

“*How did I deserve that? Why’d you let him do that?*”

“We agreed, as you recall, if the dog misbehaves you accept punishment for it.”

“Fuck that!” Riki wiped his mouth again, angrily. “No one deserves that and if he tries it again *I’ll* piss on his pretty fucking boots!”

Iason swatted Riki’s ass, then ran a soothing hand over it. “Behave now, we have to discuss a few things.”

“Why’d you do that?” Katze murmured as Raoul, his hair neatly braided, moved to stand by the communications chair that he had commandeered. He’d felt a sharp pang of discomfort at the sight of the Blondie kissing Riki and couldn’t quite understand why.

Raoul smiled. “It was the only thing I could think of that would really piss him off.”

Katze scowled and started to rise to give Raoul the chair, but the Blondie gently pushed him back into it.

“Stay.”

“Don’t touch me,” Katze hissed and glanced at Iason who was still trying to calm Riki down. He grabbed his cane and rose again, moved to stand closer to his employer and further away from Raoul.

Raoul scowled but allowed it and dropped into the vacated chair. He was suddenly incredibly tired. He accepted a cup of tea from Cal’s tray then glanced at the large Onyx seated in the middle of the bridge. “Is it just you and the Bragini crewing a ship of this size?” he asked. “Or are there others I have not seen?”

“Everything is automated, there need only be one person to crew it really.” Shiao smiled as Cal stepped up to offer him a drink. “Thank you, sweet boy,” he said and was delighted when a tickle of pink edged into Cal’s pale cheeks.

He supposed the boy was used to being dismissed or ignored as Furniture, and while Cal was nearly as tall as Riki, a spark of innocence was still obvious in the youthful face. He’d had Furniture when he was living on Amoï but had never bothered with it after he’d fled. It was rather nostalgic.

“Cal,” Iason began as he waved off the offer of tea. “It is no longer your position to tend to a Blondie, but would you take an outfit from my temporary quarters, cabin 12 on level B and bring it to Lord Gideon that he might change. He is in Cabin 6, same level.”

“Wait, isn’t he the cause of our trouble?” Riki demanded? “You can’t send Cal...”

“Master Gideon saved me from the Onyx, Riki,” Cal replied. “It’s highly illogical that he would attempt to injure me now.” Cal looked back at Iason. “I would be happy to do so, Sir.”

Iason gave Cal the security code for the door and decided to give up trying to get the boy to use his name, he supposed Cal was simply more comfortable with the formality.

“I’ll go with him,” Carrie offered rising and watched Ran’talgis also rise.

“I will also accompany you,” the Dakfure decided, he would remain close to the woman until he could convince her to return with him to their home world.

Carrie rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“Bring the grump some food as well, would you, Cal?” Raoul asked as the three of them walked to the lift. “I believe bread and water is customary for a prisoner.” He caught a shadow of a smile on the young man’s face.

“I will check the food stores and see if it is available,” Cal returned just before the lift doors closed on them.

Iason nodded. “Raoul, tell them what you found. What caused Jupiter to attempt to terminate you.”

Raoul did as he was asked, explaining Jupiter’s strange behavior and had what had caused him to go in search of Her control room. When he spoke about the clones, it was Riki this time who slowly dropped into a vacant

chair, much as Iason had done earlier. His rich, dark skin turned a sickly pale and Iason immediately moved to him.

“It...it can’t be,” he murmured. “Why...why would? I don’t understand.”

“No,” Iason agreed as he placed a firm hand on Riki’s shoulder. “None of us can understand it. Only Jupiter knows and it is She we must ask.”

“But *why* me?” Riki realized this one thought seemed to be a theme in his life.

Why was he left at Guardian as a child? Why had he needed to suffer the way he had, lived the way he had, like a mongrel; lower than dirt? Why did Iason take him? Why did the Blondie love him? Why had Guy come after him and so easily destroyed their friendship? Why had he been taken from a family he never knew and why, *why* would Jupiter make clones of him?

“Why is it always *me*?” he muttered and feeling overwhelmed he turned his head into Iason’s stomach, clutched at him as the Blondie stood by his chair. “I’m nothing. I’m a mongrel. Why is it always me?”

Iason caressed Riki’s hair and asked himself the same question. It disturbed him, this new insight into Jupiter’s plans, in a way it alarmed him, but Riki needed his support not his fear. “It doesn’t matter why because whatever She intends to do we shall stop Her.”

“Anyone have any idea on how we’re gonna do that?” Katze asked as he hopped up onto the edge of a console that had a clear space and no instrumentation; his foot was killing him again but he refused to show it because he knew, he just knew that Raoul would try and shove more pills down his throat.

Iason, intent on Riki, was startled to find that when he glanced up, everyone was looking at him. For the first time in his life, the Blondie did not accept desire the responsibility, nor did he have the answers they needed. Instead, he looked to Shiao. “Well?”

Shiao had been listening to Raoul's recitation and staring straight ahead at the main viewscreen. They were well enough away from Amoï now that Jupiter would not be able to sense them, and if any of Her Elites were dispatched it was a reasonable assumption they would not be looking at a salvage freighter for a Blondie to travel in.

The clones of the mongrel made no sense to him. Jupiter had spoken of cloning before, in the very early years, but She'd abandoned it as the results were too Human, too difficult to control with so much genetic material. Raoul had stated that the mongrel clones were also partially cybernetic, according to Jupiter's own words, so it was possible Jupiter had found the right formula to get the being She desired and still maintain strict control over them.

Still, why make so many that were the same? The Onyx had all been the same, looked the same, but when She created the Elites She only gave them similar construction and traits. While certain groups shared a certain shade of hair as their designation, their faces were unique and they were allowed to develop individual personalities that also set them apart from each other.

The Blondies were all impossibly beautiful, and from a distance they appeared to be the same, but once you were close you saw that they were each distinct. Why go from such differences, such offer of uniqueness to identical beings?

He considered what had happened to the original Onyx, how they had lost control, went mad as it were. He never discovered the source of the madness, but over the years had decided the most logical cause had been Jupiter. There were hundreds of possible theories as to why She so easily destroyed something She had worked so diligently to create, but they all had a level of flawed reasoning. Not one, of all the possibilities he had concluded, had given him a satisfactory answer.

His instinct was to flee from Jupiter altogether and leave those on Amoï to their fate, after all no one had aided him or his kind. The intention had been to do just that, to hide away on the Dakfure planet and forget Jupiter and Iason and all the rest, but he could not. The more he tried to convince himself of what was best for him and for Guy, the more he understood that

he would not, could not leave Iason to that fate. Raoul, Gideon, the young Furniture and mongrel pet, none of these mattered to him, but Iason, well, Iason was different. He could not explain the hold the Blondie had over him, but perhaps it was simply as Guy had said. He helped create Iason, and therefore he felt responsible. Not as father figure, surely but as something.

“Shiao?”

Guy’s hand on his shoulder pulled him out of his reverie and he glanced up to find everyone was now silently watching him.

“My apologies,” he offered, pushed out of the seat and rose to his feet. “I have no answers. Like you, I have only more questions. We can ferry any who want to leave Amoï permanently wherever they wish to go, but at this time I cannot offer even a semblance of a plan aside from retreat.” He walked to the large view screen, clasped his hands behind his back and stared out at the stars. “I need more information. More variables must be considered.”

“I will see this through,” Iason decided. “This is our home, and they are our brothers. We cannot leave them all to die.”

“Jupiter’s reach is far and wide, Iason. Escape may not be possible, even now.”

There was such sadness in Shiao’s statement that Guy wanted to go to him, hold him, but the mongrel just gripped the back of the Captain’s chair and remained where he was. He wasn’t ready for such a display, not in front of Riki, or Iason for that matter, and he wasn’t entirely sure Shiao would welcome such a public show of affection and support.

“I had considered that She might be experiencing a technical difficulty,” Raoul reminded them. “That was why I had gone to Her control room. I have some knowledge of Her systems, She needed to trust someone with it, and I had wondered if there might be a glitch, or failure in one of them.”

“Jupiter has been self-aware for centuries,” Iason argued. “Outside access cannot be attained and Her systems are self-repairing. It was a low

probability.”

“Yes, but it was a probability that needed to be investigated. Finding the clones had been an accident and She was not at all pleased about it. She said something...” Raoul tried to remember Jupiter’s last words to him, but that passage of time was still fuzzy inside his mind. “I remember Her reasoning for the clones was something about them being a perfect blend and that I, that we as Blondies, were somehow flawed.”

“If you are flawed, if She sees you as such, would that not mean this Jupiter was to blame?” Yielia, who had been silent until now asked.

“Yeah,” Guy approved. “She made the Blondies and the other Elites so if there was a flaw in any of you it’s Her fault.”

“Jupiter does not think in such a linear fashion,” Shiao stated. “She could not be at fault for She is Jupiter, therefore it would be the fault in Elites themselves that is the issue. She gave us the ability to make our own choices, therefore if those choices resulted in what She would consider flaws, it is we who are to blame.”

“As the Creator of your kind, it would also be the responsibility of Jupiter to fix.” Yielia surmised. “A resolution, based on what I have heard, that is tantamount to genocide.” “Specifically, I would not term it as such, but essentially it is the same, yes.” Shiao finally turned away from the window and faced them. “Her knowledge and cunning are unparalleled. She considers Herself as the highest authority, the most intelligent, most advanced being in the system, possibly the universe, and it is highly probable that such considerations are true. An AI that has existed for centuries can out think, out last and out maneuver any attempted plan we decided on. She will already have considered every move we intend to make, both logically and strategically.”

Yielia shook her head, the odds were not in their favor to battle such a creature. She moved to Riki’s side and touched his shoulder. “Come to Avalon, Maku.” She looked at the others. “All of you would be welcome there.”

Iason shook his head. “Jupiter would destroy your people, your planet to get to us.”

“We have defences...”

“None that could match our forces and weaponry, Yielia.” Iason did something he rarely did, he touched her; placed his hand over hers on Riki’s shoulder because he appreciated her offer. “Take Riki and Cal. Jupiter may...”

“No.”

They looked down at Riki who appeared to have gotten past his shock and self-pity and was slowly filling up with rage and a thirst for revenge.

“Riki, you would be safe there!”

“Yeah,” Guy agreed. “You should go, man. They’d protect you.”

Riki glanced up at Iason. “You just said that Jupiter would destroy Avalon looking for us, Iason,”

“For me, perhaps, but if it is you and Cal She might...”

“I’m not going without you!” Riki rose, curled his hands into fists. “She fucking cloned me, Iason. She threatened war with a people that meant nothing to Her just to get us back, both of us. I don’t know what She’s thinking or what part She expects me to play in all this but obviously I am part of it. Running away doesn’t solve anything, it only delays it and gets more people hurt.”

“As the Captain has stated, none of us can win against Her, Maku. She is too powerful and to attempt such a feat is suicide. I am your Edbarde, I cannot allow you to put yourself in harm’s way.”

“It’s fine,” Riki assured as he felt his confidence, his pride and then his anger return. “Because I’m gonna be putting you in harm’s way with me.” He turned to Shiao. “You said Jupiter will be able to guess any possible

move, logically or strategically that we might make and thwart any plan, right?

Shiao nodded. "This is the case."

"But you're wrong."

All three Elites stared at Riki stunned at the insult.

"Riki!" Iason scolded.

"You're wrong because Jupiter can out think us, outwit us and outmaneuver us, but She can't out feel us."

"That doesn't even make sense, man," Guy scowled, but he could see remnants of his old pairing partner returning, Riki the Dark was coming back into the light and he started to smile.

"It does because even though Jupiter may have had an ulterior motive for those sessions we had, I did too. I got to know Her, to pick Her apart just like She was doing to me. It was easy because She didn't think I'd be looking that close, didn't think it would occur to me so there were a few times She let down Her guard. I can tell you one thing we have that Jupiter doesn't."

"Legs?"

Iason glared at Guy and the irritating mongrel simply smirked back at him.

"Emotions. Real ones. She can emulate emotions, guess what they are and try to replicate them, try to predict them but it's all an illusion. Just surface bullshit. She doesn't get them because She can't feel them"

Yiela nodded as his reasoning became clear. "She cannot truly think like a Human."

"Exactly. She doesn't understand desperation and pride." He looked at Iason. "Or love, compassion and sacrifice because She can't feel them. If

She can predict what we'll do, then we make a move that is unpredictable, illogical and completely off Her scope of possibility."

No way was he letting Jupiter use him, or his likeness or whatever the hell those things were to destroy an entire race of beings. Granted, he hated most of the Elites, okay probably all of them except Iason, but that didn't mean he was going to let Jupiter have Her way in everything. Living in Ceres had taught him one very important lesson, when people shit on you, you find a fucking big umbrella and piss all over them right back. You never gave up an advantage, never forgave a slight and never, never, let anyone dictate who you were or what you were capable of.

"What do you mean, Riki?"

"We do what She doesn't expect, what She doesn't even consider a Blondie would do, because you can bet your ass She will assume you will take the lead, that we'd all listen to you."

"A reasonable assumption," Iason decided, his tone held a hint of censure.
"As I am the most capable of such as task."

"Exactly, so fuck that! We don't rely on logic or your instincts at all. We get dirty, we get devious, we get mean and when She's good a pissed, we turn it back on Her."

"I'm not following you at all," Raoul admitted.

"And *I* am insulted," Iason tossed, however Riki's words were starting to make an impact and he was becoming impressed with his beloved's theory.

"It's simple," Guy grinned. "He's saying, we act like Mongrels and just don't give a fuck. We hit low, we hit hard. We blow shit up and cause chaos."

"No one disturbs shit like Mongrels can." Riki crossed to Guy and clasped his friends arm in a familiar way that was known only to their gang, the sign for battle. "We distract and we tease and we slip on through."

“We pick up what we please,” Guy recited with a grin. “Cause that’s what Mongrel’s do.”

“A plan that has no rhyme or reason is no plan at all,” Katze stated, but he felt a kernel of excitement start in his chest. It could work. If they got a few more mongrels on their side, coupled with his equipment and connections in the Black Market, they just might be able to do something here. Something outrageous and possibly lethal, and something Jupiter would never see coming. “I’m sorry Iason but I am so up for that.”

Riki grinned at him and turned to Shiao, who was studying him quietly. “Well, what do you say?”

“Your suggestion is not without merit,” Shiao agreed, seeing the glee in Guy’s eyes. “Jupiter considers Mongrels beneath Her and powerless. She prides Amoï on the strict order that She regulates. Disruption of that order may indeed cause enough of an influx to Her systems to give us a chance at an internal assault.”

“So.” Riki stepped up to Iason, slid his arms around the Blondie. “You wanna help us break that bitch?”

Iason had mixed feelings on the subject. On the one hand he was furious with Jupiter for what She had done to Riki, and he knew that destroying Jupiter was probably the only way any of them might survive. On the other hand, She was his creator and he had an ingrained sense of loyalty to Her, regardless of what else had happened.

He caught Riki’s face between his hands, thought of what his life had been like before he’d met Riki and how much he had grown and experienced emotionally with the prideful mongrel at his side. Jupiter had created him. Riki loved him. Jupiter had awarded him a coveted position on Amoï as leader of the Syndicate, but Riki had given him his first experience with physical pleasure and an entire catalogue of new emotions. He was Jupiter’s favored son. He was Riki’s life mate.

Iason tore his gaze away from his beloved and regarded the others around him. Jupiter had tried to kill Raoul. Jupiter had sent Onyx to harm Cal and

would have succeeded if not for his brother Gideon. He looked at Shiao, whose kind had been murdered by Jupiter and yet had still taken part in his creation. The Onyx had never asked anything of him, never demanded restitution from Jupiter or considered revenge. Shiao had lost everything and had started a new life away from Jupiter's ever seeing eye, yet he'd risked everything to come back and help.

He turned back to Riki, who looked up at him, patiently waiting. Jupiter was turning them all mad and that madness had caused one of his brothers to lash out and attempt to murder them, to take Riki from him. Jupiter wanted Riki, for whatever reason and he would not let Her have him. Jupiter wanted to destroy him, and Riki wanted only to protect him.

"I love you." He pressed his lips gently to Riki's in a feather soft kiss.
"Let's go fuck shit up."

Chapter 39

Summary for the Chapter:

Gideon confesses to Iason and a plan begins to stop Jupiter.

Gideon glanced up as Iason, Raoul and Shiao entered his secured room. Iason's young furniture had brought him clothes so he could shower and change and had dried and styled his hair. The boy had also provided a rather simple meal, no doubt from the ships limited stores. As a result of all of this, Gideon was in a far better mood and was entertaining Cal with tales of some of his more memorable incidents in Midas.

When his brothers and the Onyx entered, however, Cal rose and nodded to them, before quickly making his exit. Gideon sighed with disappointment, but deliberately remained seated in one of the small, narrow, room chairs. If he was to be interrogated he was determined to be comfortable.

"You know," Gideon began glancing at Shiao as he crossed one long leg over the other and taking a sip of the tea Cal had prepared for him. "I think I prefer you to the current models of Onyx. You would think there would be more similarities but you are really quite unique from them, aren't you?"

Shiao crossed his arms and leaned against the closed door, as if baring the entry, or exit, but for four Elites to be in the same tiny crewman's quarters there was little room left to stand, or for fighting or abuse. It was better this way, he decided, as he did not want to give Iason any additional opportunity to do away with the other Blondie. Not that he cared about Gideon Lagnat one way or the other, he simply didn't want to face the fallout of Iason's actions.

From what he had learned so far, Iason Mink was known for being cold-hearted and making brutal decisions that few others could stomach, and without reservation. However, as tough and as frightening as everyone else

believed Iason to be, Shiao had been inside his head, had shared Iason's thoughts, and he knew that the Blondie did suffer regret. Iason would not admit to it consciously, but Shiao had seen the proof of it, and he would not allow Iason to regret further. It was obvious that the largest regret would be how they decided to handle Jupiter; Shiao felt that would cause enough torment for Iason.

"You've been cleaned and fed, now you will tell us what you know of the attacks on Iason," Raoul ordered Gideon. "Any attempts to delay further will test our patience, and..." He smiled and leaned down into Gideon's space. "You know what I do to those that I lose patience with, Gideon."

Gideon nodded. He'd expected the threat. Raoul's interrogation techniques had always been murmured about in closed circles. He was the most logical, the most scientific of the Blondies, and that, perhaps, made him so much more worse when it came to finding ways of making others talk. Gideon had seen firsthand how Raoul approached such things, with a cross of seduction and terror.

The Blondie could continue to talk and act in a charming, caring manner while discussing and often participating in brutal acts of torture; Raoul's congenial smile was often far worse than the actual physical abuse; it was a kind of psychological warfare atop the physical threat.

Ironically, while Gideon had reason to fear Iason, as everyone did, he was probably the only one who understood the darker side of Raoul Am. It was a side that he suspected Iason himself was unaware of and part of him relished the idea of exposing Raoul for what he was, but his brother would only make him suffer more for it.

"I want you to understand that I never realized things would go this far, Iason."

Raoul caught Gideon's chin in a firm grasp and turned the Blondie's look back to him. His thumb rubbed almost lovingly across his brother's lips. "Your thoughts are irrelevant. Give me a name, Gideon. Now."

Gideon swallowed and stared into the dark jade eyes that he had always thought beautiful and had to oppress a shiver at the dangerously calculating look of them now. “Raoul, please,” he began. “We are...” He stopped when the grip on his chin tightened. It wasn’t painful, as such, but it was a warning and Gideon realized that he truly could not delay any longer. “Issac.”

Shiao watched Iason’s hand twitch, the Blondie’s almost imperceptible way of flinching.

“You lie,” Raoul said as he straightened. “Issac is missing so you are using him as a stooge.”

“No.” Gideon took a final sip of tea then set the cup down on the small corner table. “The Phashing you demanded affected him badly, Iason.”

“He was near catatonic,” Iason began. “You said so yourself and asked me to go see him because of this.”

“And you denied my request.” The bitterness slipped into Gideon’s voice before he corrected it. “It was less than a week later when I went to see him. Something had triggered him and he had destroyed his room and was screaming that something was in his head, that his brain was on fire.”

“This is nonsense. You will not sit there and concoct a ridiculous story...”

“You wanted the truth and I am giving it to you!” Gideon bolted to his feet and both Blondies had to step back just to avoid direct contact by the action, due to the close quarters. “The procedure damaged his brain, Iason. He was not in his right mind, he is still not in his right mind! I could not leave him there, curled on the floor and sobbing like a Human child. He is still a Blondie of Tanagura!”

“So you took him out of the hospital,” Raoul stated as he started to see the path that Gideon’s story was taken. “Why? That was the worst thing you could have done if he were truly ill.”

“Because he is Issac! I could not leave him there because he is my brother.” Gideon’s venomous, accusing gaze landed on Iason as he continued. “I would not abandon him as you did.”

“Issac allowed our security to be breached, Gideon. He engineered a kidnapping against Riki and Iason, his own brother. The consequences of those actions were...”

“Unjust!” Gideon ignored Raoul and remained focused on Iason who stood against the wall, saying nothing. “I had to get him out of there. I had intended to bring him somewhere safe and have a doctor I trusted look at him, but he got away from me.”

“Got away from you?”

“He was suffering from such pain and paranoia, that when I tried to put him in my car he bolted. It took me three weeks to find him and when I did I tried to convince him to come back with me, but by then he had already started his vendetta against Iason.” Gideon shook his head and slowly lowered himself to the chair again. “Believe it or not you would have suffered far more inconveniences had I not been learned of them and intervened.”

“Do you believe that exonerates you from what has happened?” Raoul demanded. “From the plans you had not been able to stop? You should have come to us with this immediately, Gideon! Because you did not you are just as guilty as Issac!”

“So be it!” Gideon was on his feet again. “But I will not shoulder the burden alone!” He turned to Iason once more, fury in his eyes. “You were the last created, Iason, but it was Issac who we all considered to be the youngest Blondie. It was Issac who was the most childlike, the most naive and the most wonderfully frustrating. You coddled him, Raoul encouraged his bad behavior and our brothers treated him more as a pet than a Blondie.”

“All the more reason why you should have...”

Gideon cut off Raoul's interruption. "I was the one who saw that he was disciplined. It was I who forced him to study and do his work properly. I, who tried to mold him into a proper Blondie that deserved everyone's respect!"

"You speak of him as if he were your..." Shiao began with his first attempt at entering the conversation, then snapped his mouth shut just as quickly. A kernel of sympathy spread through him for the angry Blondie, and deep empathy.

"His what?" Raoul demanded, glancing at the now silent Onyx then back to Gideon.

He had seen many expressions on his brother's face over the years, amusement, annoyance, distaste, intrigue, even lust, but never had he witnessed such devastation, such anguish as he was seeing now. It was difficult to believe Gideon, who was perhaps the most jovial of all of them, could even form such an expression.

"He was mine!" Gideon hissed as his hands curled into fists; his body vibrated with anger. "You took him from me with your choice of punishment. He only did what he did because he adored you. He always loved you best and you forgot about him! Forgot that he loved you, forgot that he needed you and instead you spent all of your time with that damned pet and left Issac alone!"

Iason felt his chest tighten at the words but refused to be blamed for the actions of another, especially that of his brother. "Issac was a Blondie, he made his own choices and was free to do whatever he wanted and spend his time with whoever he wanted..."

"He wanted you! Damn it Iason, how could you not know that? You were his world! The other brothers had no time for him unless he was misbehaving and they could derive some amusement from it. That was the only reason he misbehaved at all was to garner some attention."

"You said yourself that it was you molding him..."

“He hated me for it! He played tricks on me and often times avoided me because I tried to make him into what he was not. When he was hiding from me or from his work and studies it was you to whom he ran, because you made him feel safe. Because you always listened to him, and damn you, you cannot do that for another and then suddenly cut him out of your life; not even as a Blondie!”

“I did not cut him out!” Iason denied and felt his own temper rising, perhaps because there was some truth in what Gideon was accusing him of. “He was a Blondie and my brother but he was never my responsibility. As for Issac’s feelings, if he truly felt that way then he should have come to me, as he always had. He knew he could, he always knew he could come to me with any problem, so how dare you stand there and accuse me of such things!”

“Bullshit! How many times had he tried to contact you over the last few years, Iason? How many times had he invited you to dinner or a pet party? How many invitations did you deny him, as you denied all of us, because you were too damn busy fucking the mongrel?”

“This is getting us nowhere.” Raoul said, as he stepped in before things became too heated to contain. “If Issac is behind the attacks against Iason he must be stopped. Your culpability in the incidents, Gideon, is obvious, but will have to be overlooked for now.”

“Overlooked!” Iason snarled.

“We have more pressing matters to deal with, Iason.”

Gideon, once again, slumped into the chair and suddenly looked very, very tired. “Perhaps that was why I allowed that vehicle into Eos and why I did not tell you that Issac was behind your troubles. I wanted you to pay for what you had done to him, for changing him, but I never wanted you dead, Iason.” He glanced up at the frigid blue eyes of his brother. “When I heard of the attack and the subsequent collapse I was horrified, truly, and it made me realize how unstable Issac really was. That was when I put all my efforts into stopping him, but then Raoul accused me and we went to Jupiter, and I frankly still do not understand completely what is going on

there or why I was accused of murder, but I truly have been trying to make it right!"

"This may not be Issac's fault either, Iason." Shiao stated quietly. "If, as you say, that procedure had been performed on him, his mind would have been more susceptible to outside interference. He could have been the first to be infected with the madness."

"Madness. Madness, *madness*." Iason tossed up his hands, a sign of frustration that was truly rare for the Blondie. "All I hear about is this bloody madness." What is the cause of it? How did it start and how can it be stopped? "I am sick to death of it!"

If there had been room to pace he would have done so, as there was not, he hit the wall closest to him instead and promptly put his fist through it. Is Jupiter truly the cause of all of this or was there an error in the Phashing that, coupled with Issac's strong, emotions, caused him to be unstable? If it is the first, there can be no reason, no logical choice for Jupiter to destroy Her own creations. If it is the second then Issac was beyond their help and must be found and destroyed.

"Perhaps we should all take a break and find our bearings," Shiao offered in his usual quiet manner. "Everyone's emotions are quite high and we should step back for a moment."

"What emotions?" Iason demanded, but his hard gaze landed on Gideon. "According to my own brother I have *none*. I am just a machine!"

"I never sai..." Gideon began, shocked.

"What else could be implied when you insist that I am the cause of Issac's behavior? That by my own fault of not feeling anything for my own brother I am the guilty party here?"

"And so you are!" Gideon stated, rising to the bait. "But I never intimated that you had no feelings, Iason. I am not the others and would never accuse you of such. I know you have them. what I am charging you with is

allowing your feelings for your pet to overshadow any feelings you had for anyone else, especially Issac.”

“You think that I do not care for Issac?”

“How could you when you demanded such a punishment?”

“For his own good, damn you!” Iason shouted, startling all three elites with him. “He was too attached to me, too dependent. He had to learn to stand on his own, to face the consequences of his actions without my constant interference.”

“You refused...”

My refusal for his invitations and to give him attention had nothing to do with Riki. I was simply trying to ween him off me! He was like a child attached to a mother’s breast and would not give up. He could not stand as a Blondie and remain as he was, which was made obvious by his jealousy and choice of action.”

“He only wished to stand by your side, Iason!”

“That was my wish also, to stand beside me as a Blondie, as my brother, not as a weak, pathetic child. The Phashing would have wiped his memories of me so that he could relearn how to be independent and stand on his own. It was a punishment for his crime, a consequence, yes, but it was also to help him.”

Gideon was confused. “But...”

“I did not know love until I met Riki, had never experienced the need or desire for another to remain with me in my life, or the joy that having that person could bring. It made me realize, made me fully understand, why I had treated Issac as I had in the past. You may have guided him, taught him and wanted to mold him, but I loved him too. I loved him in a way that made him weak, that made him a target for our brothers as I had once been. I wanted him to be more. I wanted him to want to be better than he was and so I tried to correct my mistake.”

“It was the wrong way to do it.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Perhaps, if he hadn’t cut Issac off so cruelly, so deliberately? If he had offered him some small semblance of their former companionship; but Iason believed that would have only made Issac cling to him harder. He had made the decision to force Issac to stand on his own because it had been the logical choice. He would not regret it and if this nonsense of a Blondie’s madness had not interfered it may well have worked. “The point of the matter is, your actions, your choices have made certain that he cannot be saved, so if you wish to cast blame, do it on yourself.”

Gideon did not refute Iason’s charge because he was, above all things, an honest Blondie. “Fine. I will accept some of the blame, but regardless of our past feelings or actions, we now must face the threat which is in front of us. I attempted to speak with Issac again after Jupiter released me but he is too far gone and barely seemed to recognize me, It is as if he has taken on an entirely different persona, so we must find another way to stop him.” His gaze narrowed on Iason. “I do not want him hurt, Iason. You owe me the lives of your Furniture and that female. I will collect on that debt now and ask that you do not harm him.”

“I will make you no promises. I can only react to what is in front of me, Gideon, and Issac will have as much say in that outcome as any of us do.”

“Iason,” Raoul began, relieved that at least some of the tension was waning. “If we deal with the madness, with Jupiter, then perhaps Issac will go back to normal and we won’t have to worry about consequences or promises.”

“Your brother is correct,” Shiao stated. “We have wasted enough time on this. You declined my offer to flee, therefore we must devise a plan and do so quickly, to deal with Jupiter.” He nodded at Gideon. “We are but a few, so while I do not wholly like the idea, given his past behavior, we will require all hands on deck.”

Iason nodded. “Fine,” he growled, turned and strode out of the room. Shiao glanced at the remaining occupants, then followed.

“Have I been recruited for some secret mission?” Gideon asked, curious.
“What is it exactly you are planning?”

“A war,” Raoul replied, grimly. “And you, brother, have been drafted.”

When they returned to the bridge, Re immediately called for Shiao’s attention.

“I managed to log into the main surveillance systems in the Tanagura and Midas sectors,” he stated.

“Show me,” Shiao demanded and watched as once more the view screen ahead of them became the vessel for a view of the cities on Amoï.

It was scenes of total madness. Buildings were burning, people were shouting, crying and screaming as the elites of Jupiter raped, pillaged, murdered and destroyed the city around them.

“How far will Jupiter let this go?” Katze whispered in disbelief.

“Until She feels it has gone far enough to warrant Her decision to destroy the elites.”

“But She wants to destroy them, so why not do it and save everyone the suffering?”

“There is no answer that can relieve you,” Shiao decided and turned to Iason. “There is no other way now. We must stop Her.”

Iason nodded. “I will go to Jupiter’s tower and speak with Her...”

“The time for speaking is gone, Iason. We must disrupt Her power at the source.”

“She’ll will just go to another grid,” Guy interceded. “Isn’t that you said, that She has places all over Amoi?”

Iason was startled that the mongrel had bothered to listen to anything he had said.

“We will use Riki’s plan to distract Her,” Raoul decided and ignored the startled look Riki gave him. “If we can focus all Her attention in one place for a short period of time.” He looked at Riki. “Can you do that?”

“Sure.” He smirked. “Where do you want Her *focused*? ”

“Midas would be the best place,” Gideon suggested. “It’s further than the other cities and will cost Her more in energy to channel commands up there.”

“You don’t seem particularly concerned that we are discussing murdering your mom.”

Gideon scowled at Guy’s jab. “Jupiter created me, but She has never owned me. If She truly is the cause of what is happening to us, what happened to Issac, I have no problems with you disrupting Her plans.” He also smiled. “As for murder, stopping Jupiter is one thing, destroying Her is beyond your capabilities.

“Riki.” Iason walked over to his beloved and decided not to contradict his brother. If it came down to it, and the only way to save his brothers, save Riki was Jupiter’s death he would do it, by his own hand if necessary. “What will you need to do your part?”

“Money,” Guy replied before Riki could. “We’ll need money, weapons and passes into Midas. Mongrels like to create a stink, but they’re more inspired to do it if there’s something in it for them.”

Iason looked at Katze who nodded, then again spoke to Riki. “What exactly are these plans?”

Riki slowly smiled. “The less you know the better,” he assured. “Trust me, it’ll be a big enough distraction that even Jupiter won’t be able to ignore it.”

“Fine.” Raoul nodded. “I can shut down the main grid but that will only cause a delay and will not stop Her indefinitely.”

“Why?” Guy asked.

“Jupiter’s Tower is on a separate grid. Shutting down the main grid will prevent Her from entering outside systems, but the Jupiter grid is far more complex and has the best defenses. It too will need to be shut down or She will regain power again almost immediately.”

“Even if we succeed in shutting down both grids, She will still have one place left to run,” Shiao stated and held Iason’s gaze. After a long, tense moment he nodded.

“I will take care of it.”

“Take care of what?” Riki asked but Shiao was already speaking again.

“Jupiter is at Her most vulnerable during the Deep Sleep. If I go to that chamber and activate the program while She is dealing with the trouble in Midas, She will have to divert more power to link with me. I can keep Her distracted long enough for both grids to be shut down.”

“If you’re in there when the grid goes there may be significant damage to the tower systems,” Iason warned. “If you are still linked with Jupiter you will be unable to escape the sleep chamber before the building shuts down.”

“What?” Guy asked. “So, you mean he can’t get out after?”

“He will be unable to function at all, let alone attempt an escape.”

“But, can’t we just go back in and get him?”

Raoul shook his head. “Jupiter’s Tower will shut down completely when the main power goes, no access in or out. It is a defensive failsafe She created

in case of invasion, so anyone going in must be in before that happens. Her grid is outside of the main tower, but still heavily protected.”

“So how do we get him out?”

“You don’t,” Shiao stated quietly and set his hand upon Guy’s shoulder.

“No,” the mongrel decided, shrugging off the hand, and then grabbing hold of it. “No! That’s suicide, Shiao!”

“And what She is doing is genocide. She must be stopped at all costs, Guy.”

“Then I’m going with you!”

“No. You have your assignment, remember? With Riki?”

“Fuck that! I’m going with you!”

Shiao tried not to think of how happy Guy’s choosing of him over Riki made him. “You will be unable to link with Jupiter, Guy. What would be the point?”

“The point is while you’re linking or some shit I’ll be looking for a way out when the power blows. There is always a way in and out, no matter how tight the security. If we can just get the schematics...”

Cal shyly raised his hand. “Pardon me for interrupting, but I can draw up a map of both grids and the two towers.” He took an uncomfortable step back when all eyes turned to him. “If...if that will help.”

“How can you do that?” Shiao demanded.

“Some people read books, Cal reads building plans,” Riki said, tossing an arm over the boy’s shoulder. “He only needs to see it once to know where everything is.” He turned to Shiao. “Guy’s right. Mongrel’s excel at getting in and out of impossible places, you should take him with you.”

“Will you not need him for your own plan?” Iason asked, surprised that Riki would so easily offer to send his old pairing partner into such danger.

“Nah, it’ll only take us maybe thirty minutes to rile everyone up and start that ball rolling, which means we’re both free to take part in the next stage.”

“It might be a one-way trip,” Katze reminded. “You could be sending him to die.”

Riki shrugged. “Jupiter isn’t stopped, we all die.”

Riki could see it, the fear, and the love his old partner held for the Onyx, and having sacrificed himself for Iason once before, he would not keep Guy from doing the same for Shiao. If that was what his friend needed to do. Love was some fucked up shit, but they were a fucked-up species so what the fucking hell.

“And since Jupiter’s grid is probably more difficult, Raoul should do that one and I can take care of the main grid.”

“No,” Iason refused. “You, Cal, Yielia and Carrie will return here to the ship. It’s too dangerous, Riki.”

Riki merely crossed his arms and ankles and leaned against the wall. “This is my fight too, Iason, and I won’t let you push me out of it. Jupiter needs to pay, for what She’s doing to the Blondies, for what She’s always done to the Mongrels, but beyond that once we get down there, how fucking easy do you think it’s gonna be to leave again?”

“We’ll arrange a shuttle to...”

“No, Iason.” Riki lifted his hand to the Blondie’s cheek. “I have a part to play in this too, so just let me do it.”

“It would be easier, Iason,” Raoul agreed. “I believe I can still get past Jupiter’s defenses to get into Her grid, but I cannot get across town to do the main one at the same time and they will have to go down together at precisely the same time for this to work, or else Jupiter will simply escape.”

“Katze can...”

“I’ll need Katze with me to set the charges as I will be busy circumventing Her systems.”

“No,” Katze refused, glanced at Raoul, then stepped toward Iason, as if deliberately making a choice of which Blondie he preferred. “Iason. No one is better at getting into a secured area than Riki. No one is better at out-thinking a system’s defenses then he is, except either me or Raoul and you’ll need me with you.”

Katze did not understand what he was asking, he did not even know where Iason would be headed or the danger that lurked there. “You cannot...”

“You’ll have back up, Iason, whether you want it or not. You’re not going in alone.”

“I can set the charges in the main grid,” Carrie said, stepping forward and placing her hand on Riki’s shoulder. “In my cat form I can do it quickly and get them high enough that if they are found they won’t be easily disabled.”

“I know how to set explosives,” Cal advised. “I will not be as quick as Miss Carrie, but I can assist Lord Am with his assignment.” He looked at Iason. “If I may, Sir?”

“Then I will go with Iason and Katze,” Yielia decided. “If I can be of some use?”

“Yes,” Riki decided and stepped up to her. “Her power may come in handy for you guys in case Jupiter has any surprises waiting for you.”

“Now just a damn minute!” Iason insisted, angrily. This was not going at all as he had planned. “Riki, I cannot do this if I am worried about you. You will stay on the ship, and I can bring neither a Human nor an alien creature into Jupiter’s chamber! It is forbidden!”

“Is this really the time to be worried about rules?” Carrie demanded moving to stand before the Blondie and looked up at him with flashing eyes. “Jupiter is on the rampage, destroying Her own creations and trapping the rest of us in the fallout carnage just for Her own amusement. We are all

dispensable now so to hell with Her rules. This is about survival and *that* is something I am an expert in. So get off your Blondie high horse, shove your goddamn rule book out the window and let us help you!” She jabbed a hard finger into Iason’s chest. “Because *we* are your family and you, sir, are *not* doing this alone!”

Everyone was stunned speechless by her tirade, even Iason, who could only stare down at her, shocked.

“No matter what happens after,” Guy murmured to Shiao. “That was totally worth dying for.”

Shiao shushed him, but in reality, couldn’t agree more. He liked Iason, it was difficult not to since he had a hand in creating him, but the Blondie did need to be taken down a peg. The fact that the one doing the taking was a petite Human, or half Human, made it all the more exceptional.

“Now,” Carrie snapped her hands to her hips. “Are you going to keep kicking up a fuss or can we get this plan solidified and go commit treason with a confident smile?”

“I...” Iason had no words. He honestly didn’t know how to react, or what to say to her. He glanced at Riki, Raoul, even Shiao and all of them seemed to be waiting for him to speak. “How dare you speak to me that way!” he finally managed.

“What are you gonna do, spank me?” She grabbed his tunic and pulled him down so they were eye to eye and spoke in a voice meant just for him. “We’re wasting time, Iason. I will protect Riki but he needs Yiel and Katze to go with you so he knows you’re also protected. The only way this works is with all of us working together. You can balk and sulk and play master of the manner later, if we survive, but for now, take the lead the way it has to be.”

Iason straightened and brushed a hand down his shirt, smoothing out the new wrinkles. The fact that Carrie hit on his fear for Riki as the reason for his stubbornness unnerved him, but yes, he could trust her to protect his

beloved. “It seems I am out voted,” he said quietly. “I agree to the plan, on one condition.”

“If you tell me I have to stay behind one more time...” Riki began furious.

“No. I can see that your mind is set to do this, so I will argue no further with you about it. However, I must insist that should I not return...”

“Don’t say shit like that!”

“Riki, listen to me! If I do not return from my task, if it appears that Jupiter will win this war, I want you to go back Carrie to the Dakfure world.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I can trust her to look after you.” When Riki opened his mouth to protest again Iason continued. “I will have your word, Riki or I will lock you in the storage compartment and go alone.”

Riki crossed his arms over his chest, more to quell the thudding of his heart than in defiance. “Fine. I’ll go with them, but if you get yourself killed Iason I will never, ever forgive you. Remember that. I’ll fucking hate you for it.”

Iason almost smiled, there was his beautiful, defiant, irrational mongrel he loved. “Agreed.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Things are heating up! I hope everyone is still enjoying the story. If you do please review because I am a needy writer. :-) Thanks to all those that consistently leave me such wonderful comments. They sustain me even more than Chocolate cake. LOL

Chapter 40

Summary for the Chapter:

The crew have returned to Amoi for supplies.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hmmm, lots of comments and thoughts and idea on last chapter. Looks great! Thanks so much and enjoy this one.

Iason stepped off the private elevator and glanced around at the large penthouse suite of Gideon's high-rise apartment, two miles outside the city of Midas. It was not a property listed on Gideon's assets, and Iason had been unaware that his brother had appropriated such a place. Gideon assured him that Jupiter also did not know of it, but Iason could not completely trust that promise, now that they were back on the Amoï.

Both he and Gideon wore a specially adapted ear piece based on the similar device on Shiao's ship which blocked external sensors. It had kept them safe from Jupiter's probes and disguised their ship, so Shiao and Raoul used the basis of the technology to create a similar device that would hopefully continue to block Jupiter from learning Iason and Gideon were back on the planet. It was an impressive device, considering it had been constructed in a mere few hours, but then he often dismissed how truly brilliant Raoul was; and based on their success, Shiao was equally brilliant.

They'd had to return to the planet for Katze to get the supplies Riki and Guy required, and also the equipment needed to disrupt the grids. It was a plan that had several drawbacks. For one, they had to be careful that whatever damage they inflicted on the grids could be repaired relatively quickly or the toxic atmosphere of Amoï would destroy them all. They had agreed on a small electric charge that would blow the circuits but not badly damage the equipment.

Katze and Raoul had gone off to get the supplies they needed, and of course Guy had gone to Ceres on reconnaissance to confirm who the top gang was now and which of his old friends might still be around and able to plant a few seeds for his and Riki's side of things. Riki had wanted to go with him, but Iason wouldn't allow it, so he remained behind. Carrie, Shiao and the Dakfur known as Ran'talgis and remained on board the ship to see to things on that end.

The units below Gideon's penthouse were a concern as they were also not on any legitimate registries for the area. It bothered Iason not knowing who was in them or what they were doing, but Gideon again assured him that they were of no consequence to their safety. Iason was left hanging and he did not like the feel of it. He would have to watch Gideon closely, not only for subterfuge, but also for signs of madness, now that they were essentially back within Jupiter's domain.

"Now, Cal," Gideon was saying as he guided the young man towards his kitchen. "I've heard you can do wonders with a stocked pantry. I was wondering if you could whip us up one of your marvelous meals?"

"Cal isn't Furniture anymore," Riki insisted stepping in to interrupt their path. "He doesn't have to listen to you."

"Riki."

Riki scowled at Iason. "What? Are you gonna let him..."

"Cal does not have to cook for us, but you need to watch your tone. Gideon is still a Blondie."

Riki glowered at Iason. Was he really going to worry about that shit now?

"Actually, Riki," Cal began quietly. "I'd like to cook something. I haven't been much use to everyone thus far, and it will be something that I can do."

"You don't have to be of use, you just have to be here with us, Cal."

Cal stared at Riki, stunned. It was probably the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him. He felt heat sting his cheeks and lowered his gaze. "I...I could

see if they have the ingredients for chocolate cake?"

Riki's lips twitched and he crossed his arms over his chest. He noticed that Gideon did not get offended or try to press Cal forward. "Don't try to bribe me."

"If the boy wants to cook, he should be allowed to," Gideon sighed with a wave of his hand. He was willing to put up with a certain amount of impertinence from the mongrel, given his current situation, but his patience and good will would only go so far. "We'll all feel better for it and I have some of the best stocks on Amoï."

Cal offered Riki a small smile as Gideon lead him towards the kitchen once more.

"Why are we even here?" Riki demanded of Iason. "You said we couldn't trust him."

"True, but our resources are slim, Riki." He slid a gloved finger down Riki's cheek. "Keep your eyes open, love. We must not relax for even a moment while we are here."

Riki gazed up into Iason's eyes and mirrored the Blondie's action. "Headache?"

Iason caught Riki's hand against his cheek, held it there. He was beginning to enjoy this new affectionate side of Riki. "A bit."

"It's not safe for you to be here." Riki glanced towards the kitchen. "Or him."

"No, so we must make our time short."

"I love you." Riki stepped in, slid his arms around Iason's waist. "I want you to know that. I really, really love you."

Iason returned the embrace, rested his chin on Riki's head and closed his eyes in comfort. "Then I can do anything, suffer through anything."

“You don’t have to get soppy.”

Iason chuckled, pulled back enough to lift Riki’s chin so he could kiss him.
“It is entirely your fault.”

“Nu-uh. You took me, so it’s all your fault.”

“Semantics.”

Riki grinned and pulled back as Gideon returned with a glass of wine in each hand. “How’s your head?”

Gideon offered Iason one of the glasses, then crossed over the spacious living room and settled leisurely on a wide gold-coloured sofa. “Why do you ask?”

Riki wrapped his fingers around Iason’s on the glass the Blondie had been about to lift to his lips, held Iason’s gaze as he slowly took a sip. Iason raised an eyebrow when Riki refused to release the glass for a full minute, then reluctantly let him have a sip.

“How charming,” Gideon smiled. “Are you sharing the drink or checking it for poison, pet?”

“Both,” Riki retorted boldly and watched Gideon’s eyebrow also raise in a similar fashion.

“I see. So I am still not to be trusted then?”

“How’s your head, Gideon?” Riki asked again.

“Why do you ask? I can do this all day.”

“He is asking because Jupiter may try to access your mind,” Iason stated, sipping his wine and absently running his thumb across Riki’s pouty lip. Riki hated wine, but it somehow pleased him that the mongrel’s attempt to protect him from harm.

Gideon tapped the device in his ear. “Is this not supposed to block such attempts?”

“Allegedly.” Iason found he was too tired to keep standing and so he settled into one of the matching chairs and took another sip of his wine. “It has not been tested, so if you feel any sort of pressure or pain you should make me aware of it.”

“You already look as if you are experiencing some of that yourself, Iason.”

“His is caused by something else.” Riki stated as he moved behind Iason and started massaging the Blondie’s temples.

Gideon watched his brother’s eyes close as he leaned back into the mongrel’s touch. It was really quite fascinating to see them together like this. Riki seemed to have finally shed his constant resentment and rebelliousness and had accepted his place. Of course, his place had changed and Gideon was aware of that. Riki was no longer a pet, and it seemed the change had been a good one.

“May I ask you a question, Riki?” When Riki’s gaze turned suspicious at the use of his name Gideon was amused to see not all of the mongrel’s bad-temperament had dissipated. “What did you mean when you said Yela’s power could help Iason? What powers does she have?”

Iason’s eyes opened as Riki lowered his own so that their gazes met, and while it was Riki who had been questioned, he was Iason who answered. “She’s considered a healer on her world. Riki simply meant her skill with such things, in the event I become injured.”

“Now really, Iason. I never knew you to partake in the art of bullshit.” Gideon sipped his wine, leaned back against the sofa comfortably. “I was there at the collapse of your unit. That woman was doing something to keep the debris back so we could rescue you, yet you have never explained it.

There was also something that happened when we were underwater. You don’t trust me, fair enough given my recent actions, but Iason, is it really fair for me to trust any of you either? You are asking me to commit treason against Jupiter, with people that I obviously know very little about.”

“You know nothing as you are not required to know.”

All eyes turned as Yielia spoke from across the room, they had all completely forgotten that she was there. She moved towards them, her hands clasped in front of her. It had been a shock to learn that the man who had warned them at the beach house had also been responsible for the incident that had almost taken Riki’s life.

“My gifts are my own, Lord Lagat, and only myself and my Prince need be concerned with them. If this makes you uncomfortable, imagine my own state of discomfort before I was rescued from Lord Mink’s residence, and then after not knowing if he or Riki survived. You have no right to ask anything.”

“Riki!” Iason snapped and looked up at his beloved’s guilty face. He had confided in Riki Gideon’s part in the matter but had not expected him to tell the others.

“She deserved to know,” Riki returned. “She was still thinking he was a hero or some shit.” He lowered his eyes. “I didn’t tell Cal, just Yielia.”

Gideon scowled at Riki, then turned his attention back to the dark-skinned woman before him. “I saved your life, my dear. That must award me something.”

“Yes, your own life.”

Gideon blinked, then slowly put down his wine glass. “Did you just threaten me? Do you know the punishment for threatening a Blondie?”

“Do you know the punishment for attempting to murder a Prince?” she returned just as quickly, her tone remained firm but calm. “On my world, judgment would already be carried out.”

Gideon rose and towered over her. “We are not on your world, woman, we are on Amoï and here Blondies rule and demand respect.”

Yiela stared up at him, not the least bit intimidated. “I am here for Maku. I will respect your laws, as long as they do not disturb him. I will respect his mate, as long as it does not hurt him. I will respect the will of my Prince...” She took a step closer to Gideon and her dark eyes seemed to seep into black. “As long as it is in his best interest. I will not respect anyone that causes him harm and if you are truly curious of my power, Blondie, continue as you are and you will feel it for yourself.”

“Enough!” Iason warned and winced as it caused his head to throb more. “Yiela, regardless of Gideon’s actions, you will not speak to him in such a way or threaten him.”

Yiela’s unfathomable gaze did not move from Gideon’s.

“Yiela,” Riki said quietly. “Leave it for now.”

Yiela stepped back, nodded her head to him. “As you wish, Maku. I will assist Cal in the kitchen, then.”

The three men watched her leave, then Gideon sank back into his chair.

“Do you know, I think she really meant to hurt me.” He chuckled and lifted his glass. “What a formidable creature you own, pet.”

“I don’t own, Yiela.”

Gideon shrugged and took a sip of his wine. “You really have made the most intriguing acquaintances, brother.”

“So it seems.” Iason closed his eyes again as Riki resumed the massage and let himself drift into a more relaxed state.

My love!

Here! I am Here!

What happens?

Unknown. Pain. Unseeing eyes. Cannot reach.

Do not leave!

Here! Here!

They come. They enter. It is the end.

No! No! My Heart!

Iason's eyes snapped open with a sense of fear and confusion, and he found himself still in the chair in Gideon's living area. "Riki!"

"He is sleeping," Yielia stated quietly from her position on the sofa. "You also slept?"

Had he? He hadn't been aware that he'd shut down at all, and what were those voices? "It seems so. Where is Gideon?"

"He's still eating." Raoul approached Iason. "Are you hungry? You slept for a couple of hours."

Hours? Iason was alarmed to learn he had been down for hours. "Did you get everything you needed?"

"Yes." Raoul was still a bit annoyed about how cold Katze had been to him during their time alone, but he'd deal with that when the Black-market dealer returned. "How do you feel? Any pleasure? Gideon said you had a headache earlier? Does it feel like Jupiter?"

Could those voices have been Jupiter? No, the syntax was too different and for some odd reason he felt it was more of a memory than a new intrusion. "Where is Katze?"

"He took Cal out to get some necessities, as they lost their clothes and things in the fire. We didn't think it would be a good idea to place an online order, as it might look suspicious." When he saw Iason's automatic concern he continued. "Don't worry, no one is looking for either one of them and it's only fifteen minutes to the market, they'll be back in no time."

"Yes, alright." Iason rose. "I should eat then. Has Riki eaten?"

“No, he passed out sitting by your chair, so I put him to bed when I got back.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Raoul scowled as he walked with Iason towards the dining room. “Are you sure you’re okay. You look...tired.”

“I’m fine.”

“Now is not the time to be keeping secrets, Iason.”

“No, it isn’t anything like that. I had a dream, that is all.”

“What was it about?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I need to think on it awhile, then I may ask your opinion.”

Raoul nodded as Iason settled at the table and Gideon smiled at him.

“Enjoy your nap?”

“Yes.” Iason offered Raoul a small smile as the Blondie brought him a serving of the casserole Cal had made and a fresh glass of wine. “Thank you, Raoul.”

Raoul squeezed Iason’s shoulder then settled opposite with his own plate.

Bean was mulling over piece of fruit at the stand of a small local market when a familiar voice caught his attention. He looked up and coming out of a clothing store with several packages, was the boy who was responsible for all of his troubles. The juice running down his wrist from the fruit being crushed between his fingers went unnoticed as he watched the blond Furniture smile up at the red-head beside him.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything else?” Katze grinned as he lit a cigarette.

“No, this is all I need and I am sure these other clothes will fit Miss Yielo.”

“I asked you if you wanted anything else, not needed anything else.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Nope, totally different.” Katze grabbed two of the bags from Cal. “For instance, I don’t need the flavored coffee at that stand over there, but I want one.”

Cal grinned. “It does smell delicious.”

Katze extended his elbow gallantly. “Then shall we?”

“I’d be delighted.” Cal released a small giggle as they walked towards the scented coffee stand.

Bean dropped the spoiled fruit and quietly moved forward. He shadowed them back through the market, then to a vehicle Katze had driven. Well, this was interesting, he thought as he kept his head down and brushed past the vehicle, deftly applying a tracker to it, before moving on.

His master would be very interested to learn of this new development, and as for himself, well he had a few plans of his own. The penthouse was quiet when he entered, and he suspected his master was once again holed up in the bedroom. He crossed to it, knocked, then upon hearing the moans inside he pushed open the door.

Issac was curled up on the bed in the fetal position, gripping his head and muttering incoherently. It was quite obvious, to Bean at least, that his master was going mad, and the former Furniture was desperately trying to calculate how much time he had left before the Blondie self-destructed or did something to reveal himself. Bean couldn’t allow that to happen, at least not yet. He needed to figure out how the insane Elite could benefit his own plans first.

His Master's desire to injure Iason Mink warded with Issac's love of his brother. The Shadow wanted revenge against Iason for the pain and misery he had suffered, but Issac didn't really want to hurt Iason, so most of the plans they put together to cause harm was, in one way or another, thwarted by Issac's opposite feelings.

Issac had started talking to himself almost constantly now, after meeting Gideon. The constant opposition of his feelings atop with whatever voices he was hearing in his head was causing the Blondie to devolve into a state of despair and paranoia. This meant nothing to Bean, he didn't care one way or the other if his Master went mad, but it did mean that he would have to try and stabilize Issac long enough for his own plans to be seen to.

Bean also preferred that Iason Mink not be killed, as that would make it difficult to return to his role as Iason's furniture. However, if the Blondie refused to take him back... Well, really, why would he refuse? Once the pet and the other Furniture were out of the way it was only logical that Lord Mink would require new Furniture and it also made sense that it should be one who was already familiar with his household.

Bean didn't hold Iason's actions against him. He was sure it had been Cal or Riki who had made Iason transfer him to that damn place. If, however, Iason Mink died, then he would take Bean's secret with him and it would be easy to apply as Furniture with another Elite.

"Make it stop!" Issac moaned, curling even tighter into himself. "Please make it stop."

Bean sneered at the whimpering figure then schooled his features and stepped further into the room. "Master, I have news for yo..."

Issac reared up and grabbed Bean by the shoulders. "Make it stop!" he screamed. "It's in my head! Make it stop!"

"There's only one thing that can make it stop, Master."

"What? What is it? Tell me!"

“Only Lord Mink can make it stop. We must find him so you can feel better.”

Issac released Bean to grip his head again and moaned. “Iason. I must find Iason.”

“That’s right. That is really the only way.” Come on you pathetic excuse for a Blondie, Bean thought with distaste. Pull yourself together so we can get on with this and I can finally be free of you. “I may have a way to find him, but I’ll need some help.”

“Anything, whatever you want, just do it.” Issac tossed his own credit stick at Bean then howled in pain. “Sweet Jupiter! Think...I can’t...think!”

Bean retrieved a bottle from the dressing table. “Take your medicine, Master. You’ll be able to think just fine.”

It had been a challenge to find the illegal neural blocker, it had horrific side effects to an organic brain, but Bean had found it was the only way to return Issac to The Shadow was to block out all emotion and pain. He fed the bright orange pills to the nearly sobbing Blondie, like he would an infant, poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the table and helped Issac swallow them down.

As Issac curled back up on the bed, Bean went to the wash area and damped a cloth with warm water. Issac sighed as the cloth was applied to his forehead.

“There now,” Bean crooned as he washed his master’s face with gentle hands. Blondies did not sweat or cry, but he knew the temperature and feel of the cloth would make Issac feel more refreshed after his bout of torture. “All we have to do is go to Lord Mink, and the voices will stop.”

“Yes. Yes, find Iason.”

Bean tended to his Master dutifully until he saw Issac’s expression harden, then go blank. He stepped back as The Shadow rose from the bed, reached for his mask and cloak. “I have some calls to make.”

Chapter 41

Summary for the Chapter:

Gideon shows Iason what is in the lower levels and Riki and Cal make plans

Katze had dropped Cal back at Gideon's penthouse and Cal rode the lift up then entered the suite, eager to change into the clothes he had purchased and out of the form-fitting jumpsuit. He was surprised to find only Riki remained.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"The three bears are off doing some secret shit," Riki retorted as he lounged on the sofa and flicked through a magazine. "Guy still isn't back and you were with Katze so who the hell knows where he went."

Cal sighed, Riki was in a foul mood. "Katze is still downstairs I believe," he advised quietly. "Are you hungry? If there isn't any dinner left I can..."

"No." Riki slapped down the magazine and rose. He was pissed off at waking up and finding Iason gone as much as being left behind. It only increased his need to feel like he was doing something. "Did you draw up those plans?"

"Oh, yes." Cal set his packages down and retrieved the data-pad Lord Gideon had provided him from the entry table, where he had left it. "It wasn't difficult, I downloaded the general specifications and then added what I remembered from the original plans." He showed the plans to Riki. "There is a quicker way to get to the main grid, and Jupiter's as well, but it will be dangerous."

"Why?"

“We’ll have to climb through the ventilation system to be undetected and there is a giant fan with a macrobiotic incursion field that runs through every two minutes to sweep for infections and contaminants.”

Riki studied the plans, enlarged the tubing areas that Cal spoke of. He and Cal should have no trouble getting through, a Blondie might be too big. Shiao would never make it. “Is there a way to shut off the field?”

“If we do that an alert will be immediately generated and they will send worker droids to fix it.”

“Okay, how about rerouting it?”

Cal stared at him, intrigued. “Well, once we have the exact timing sequence, we might be able to reset the timer after the first wave so the system thinks it has already completed the sweep, giving us four minutes instead of two, but I think any more than that would cause an alert.”

“What are the ducts made of, do you remember?”

“A Malachite Poly-fiber.”

“Okay, so we can’t do it from outside, it will have to be reset from inside. I could probably jury rig a hand held for it.”

“Will four minutes be enough?” Cal asked. “There is still the fan at the end of the duct just above the room we wish to get to. If we stop it, even for a second, it will cause an alarm.”

Riki considered their options. “How big is the fan?” Cal provided the approximate measurements, based on the original specifications. “We can’t stop it, and we can’t go through it because we’ll be sliced and diced.” He dropped back onto the sofa. “Can we slow it?”

“Slow it? I don’t understand. Slow it how?”

“If the fan has to keep going to prevent it from alerting maintenance, then as long as it’s still spinning it should be fine right?”

“Yes, but Riki, this is an industrial sized fan. How will you keep it spinning? You can’t do it manually it would cut through flesh and bone in an instant and any sort of wedge would cause it to stop.”

“Maybe, maybe not. We just need a wide enough opening to slip through so if we can slow it but not stop it... How wide are the blades?”

“That I do not know, but I would estimate approximately three feet wide to seven feet long, perhaps.”

“Three feet wide. So, if we slow it to say a 3-5 second ratio, there might be enough room to jump between the blades.”

Cal stared at him, horrified. “Riki! If they’re off by even a millisecond that person will be caught in the fan blade.”

“Yeah, so the smallest one should go first and see if there is a way to bypass it on the other side without sending an alert.”

Cal scowled. For the main grid Riki would be the smallest on the team, for Jupiter’s, it would be him. “Master Iason won’t like it.”

“Then we don’t tell him. He won’t be there, so what difference does it make?”

“Riki, I really don’t think...”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Not at this very moment, but we may be able to come up with one less dangerous when the others return.”

“I know how to plan as much as they do!” Riki snapped. “I’m not a fucking moron.” He paused, considered what he was asking Cal to do. “And you don’t have to go.”

“Of course I am going! It isn’t about that. Riki. If you and I don’t make it to the other side of the fans, no one else will be able to go through after and it will have been for nothing.”

“If Jupiter kills all the Elites nothing we do or don’t do will matter, right?”

“Agreed, but please, let’s discuss it with the others first? Perhaps there is another way in that I can’t recall. I’m not infallible and Lord Am will more than likely have more information to form a better...”

“Why is it better? I know what I am doing and we can do this, Cal!”

“I am not saying it’s a bad plan, just that we should have a backup. We can’t hinge everything on one sacrificial gesture of two mongrels, Riki!”

Riki blinked at the frustration in Cal’s tone, sighed and set the data-pad aside. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m pissed off because everyone went off without me.”

“You were sleeping, Riki.”

“I know! I just...I don’t want to be left behind, left out of this, and Iason will try his best to do just that!”

Cal’s need to comfort his friend warded with his training to keep his distance. Finally, he fell back on what he knew. “You’ll feel better if you eat. Are you sure I can’t fix you something?”

“I guess I could eat.” Riki picked up the packages Cal had brought in. “I’ll put these upstairs.”

Cal swallowed his automatic protest, as it would give Riki something to do. “Two of the bags are for Yielia.”

“Okay.” Riki agreed and started up the curving staircase. “Are you making cake?”

“Maybe!” Cal called back and smiled as he watched the mongrel disappear onto the higher landing. “I don’t know if I have ingredients for cake. I should have bought more...”

The sound of the main door blowing open had him spinning around in shock. He hurried towards the living room just as two men dressed in black

surged towards him.

Iason observed the factory floor as Gideon explained the types of product they made there. He had insisted on knowing what the building was for and Gideon had finally acquiesced after dinner to show him. A specialized hallucinogenic, which gave the user the ability to experience their deepest, darkest fantasies. The drug tapped into the person's psyche and pulled the experience directly from them. The addict would experience all five senses through the drug as it tapped into their bases desires and fears.

Unlike a hologram program, which required specific programming and had safety factors that could not be overridden, the drug allowed the user a more truer reality and created an actual memory which made the user recall it as an actual life experience and not a prepackage game. It had been banned most places in the galaxy due to the stress it exhibited on the brain with continued use. A banded drug was just that more desirable and most people who insisted it was for recreational use only and they would never go overboard and risk frying their brain.

The first three floors of the building were where workers produced the drugs, and the higher floors were, as Gideon explained, living quarters for his employees. It was not a registered factory and the products they were producing were highly illegal on Amoï, but Gideon was shipping the product off world and not selling it on his own, so Iason decided to dismiss the infraction. Besides, at this point a drug factory was of little consequence to their plan to destroy Jupiter.

"How many do you have working here?" Raoul inquired and narrowed his gaze as Katze, who had returned from his quick trip to the market, stopped at one of the tables to speak with one of the young men currently packaging the liquid narcotic.

"Oh, about two hundred or so," Gideon replied calmly. "They work in shifts so the work doesn't stop."

“Some of these people look familiar,” Iason commented as he scanned the workers. “Are they not pets?”

Gideon nodded, but noticed a young man closest to them flinched at the word and he almost dropped his sample. He placed a hand on the worker’s shoulder, squeezed. “They are former pets, yes.”

“All of them?” Raoul also started to study the faces. Some pets were sold into menial labour after their Masters were bored of them but most were sent to brothels to be used and abused until they died. A few, if they were lucky, could work in some of the casinos, factories or low-end stores, but it was rare to see so many in one place. “You purchased all of them?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Iason asked, curious.

“I needed workers and once they get over the idea of being a pampered pet, most of them are very willing to work for a decent wage.”

“You pay them?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” Gideon slid his hand over the golden hair of the pet beside him. “It seems a waste to toss them off simply because we no longer want them and they remain quite loyal if you show them even a little kindness.”

“Why have you not registered their employment with the Syndicate?”

“Because they are pets and cannot receive a registration number. I give them money every week and they are allowed to spend it any way they like. I pay for their lodging in the apartments upstairs, but they must purchase their own food and necessities.”

Raoul scowled when he saw the worker Katze had been speaking too discretely pass him a vial of the drug. “I don’t see the point of it, but I

suppose there are many things lately that have no point.”

“Indeed.” Iason agreed. “I wish to see the rest, Gideon.”

Gideon nodded and lead Iason towards the next level. Katze moved to follow and Raoul caught his arm.

“What is that you have there?”

Katze tried to pull away, but the Blondie’s grip was iron. “Let me go.”

“Katze, we need to discuss your drug problem.”

Katze’s eyes widened. “My *what*?” His eyes narrowed and he shrugged Raoul off. “I don’t have a drug problem.”

“Then what is this in your hand?” Raoul managed to snatch the vial from Katze’s fingers.

“A sample. Now...”

“I will not permit you to put such things in your system. And you do have a drug problem.” Raoul pointed an accusing finger at Katze’s foot, he had been limping when he’d dropped off Cal earlier, but now it was barely noticeable. “Do you deny that you took more of that damn powder?”

Katze glanced around, uneasily. “Look, this is not the time...Hey!”

Raoul yanked him over towards a break room, where three employees were settled at tables eating. “Out!”

They scrambled out immediately and Raoul closed the door.

“What the hell is your prob...” Katze began and suddenly found himself in Raoul’s arms and the Blondie’s mouth ravaging his. He tried to push back, tried to break the kiss, but he could feel his bones turning to butter.

“S...stop,” he finally managed when Raoul let him breathe.

“I do not want you to take that powder any more, Katze. I have your prescribed medication.”

“They mess with my head, I told you that!” Katze shoved away and knocked into a table, he turned to steady himself and used it as an excuse to try and get his suddenly wobbly legs back under him. Why was he so affected by Raoul’s kisses? They were better, or maybe worse than any drug he could ever take. “I can’t think when I take them.”

“And this?” Raoul held up the sample. “Do you not think this will do the same on a much grander scale?”

“For the love of...” Katze straightened and faced Raoul, annoyed. “I’m not going to take that crap! I don’t want my brain bleeding from my ears!”

“Then why did you ask for it?”

“So you could test it you, prick!”

Raoul blinked, startled.

“You...” Katze found he couldn’t meet the Blondie’s gaze and found a painting on the opposite wall suddenly very interesting. “You deal with neurological issues, right? Well...I thought if you had a sample of what this does to the brain you might be able to use it for...I don’t know...something else, some other experiment. Fuck!” He turned around again, gripped the table.

“You were thinking of me?”

“Shut up. Just shut up. Take it, use it, test it or shove it up your ass for all I care, but don’t fucking talk to me for the rest of the day!”

Raoul simply stood there staring at the door that Katze stormed out of, then when the red-head disappeared he looked at the vial in his hand. “You got it for me.” He’d received many gifts over the years, most ridiculously

expensive, but this one simple vial touched him on a level he had not been prepared for.

He smiled slowly, pocketed the vial, then walked over and selected two drinks from the machine. Stepping out of the break room he went in search of Katze and found him with the others on the third level in what appeared to be a shipping area, as vials of the drugs were being loaded into specialized boxes and placed on a conveyor belt.

“What is your profit margin for this product?” he asked Gideon as he waited for Katze to glare at him, then tossed the red-head one of the drinks. Katze caught it out of reflex.

“It’s a good...” Gideon began, just as an alarm sounded. “Oh, what now?”

“Something we should be aware of?” Iason inquired and watched as the employees quickly shut down the machines while Gideon pressed his hand to a control switch on the wall and fake panels slid down to disguise the packaging area.

The tables that held remaining product were encased in a dark field as the tops turned over and the new table showed beads and wire for jewelry making.

“Sneaky,” Katze murmured, impressed, but prepared himself for whoever had entered the building without authorization, which was the only reason he could see for the alarm.

They all turned as the elevator blew open and about a dozen men in black with taser rifles swarmed in. From the side the sound of doors banging open and they watched as more men filed in from the stairwells.

Employees started screaming and running for cover, even as the Blondie’s advanced.

“Go!” Gideon ordered them as a hidden passageway was opened and the young men hurried into it, He quickly sealed the passage before he joined the melee.

Cal reacted from instinct, he caught the first attacker and used his momentum to yank him into a shoulder flip. He picked up the discarded rifle, spun and clocked the second attacker on the chin with the butt of the weapon, then followed through with a blow to his skull. He stepped over the two men at his feet as an Onyx stepped over the threshold of the condo with a rifle in his hands.

“Stand aside, Furniture,” he ordered when he saw the young blond boy take aim with his pilfered weapon. “Know your place.”

“I am no Furniture. I am Cal, a ward of Iason Mink, an instructor to a Prince and my place is right here, between Riki and you. You will not pass.”

“How dare you threaten....” The Onyx dropped like a stone as the rifle beam took off a piece of his skull.

Cal stepped over to the fallen Elite, knowing it could not move. “I am sorry, but you gave me no choice.” Suddenly there were several more men in black outfits and hidden faces. “You will leave now!”

One of the men glanced down at the Onyx that had been their leader, then moved forward. “You can’t take all of us, little man.”

“Maybe he can’t,” Riki called from the first-floor stairwell platform. He hopped over the railing and dropped down beside Cal. “But I sure as hell can.”

Two of the men rushed forward, Cal took one out his weapon while Riki delivered a flying kick to the second. The third came after Cal, managed to knock his weapon away, but Cal blocked the man’s flying fists and managed to score a solid blow to the attacker’s solar plexus. He then switched his weight to his right foot, stomped on the man’s instep to get him closer and throw his attacker off balance, before delivering an elbow to the chin. His attacker dropped.

“I never knew you could fight like that!” Riki grinned at the younger boy and was tickled when Cal grinned back.

“You never asked!” A man lunged at him and Cal caught the man’s fisted wrist, twisted and yanked him closer so he could deliver a crushing knee to the gut, then he brought his open palm up and slammed it into the man’s nose. He released the man’s wrist only when it went limp, then stepped aside as Riki flipped his own assailant over his shoulder. Pressing their advantage, Cal slammed the side of his hand into the assailant’s neck as he landed at his feet, knocking him unconscious.

“Protection is also part of our...” Cal broke off as he was caught in the back of the head by a man behind him, and as he ducked down he watched Riki’s fist slam into the man’s face. “Training.” He rubbed his head, ruefully. “Ow.”

“Hell yeah!” Riki cried as more attacked and they jumped into the fray.

In no time at all, the pair had taken care of the threat in an astounding effort of teamwork.

“I think that’s it,” Riki stated as he looked at the scattered bodies around them.

His adrenaline was up, his lip was bleeding, his shirt torn and he never felt better. He turned to congratulate Cal, who was now across the room from him, and saw the younger man looking stunned and pale. Slowly his eyes dropped to the glowing blue shape of a vibro-blade sticking out of Cal’s chest.

Riki watched, horrified, as Cal slid down to his knees to reveal a familiar young face behind him.

“You!” Riki growled and started to charge Bean, but the Furniture tossed his blade and lifted a laser rifle.

“Did you think you could get rid of me so easily, pet?” Bean demanded with a clear madness in his eyes. “Dispose of me like I was garbage? Now

you know what happens to pets that misbehave. Now you'll pay for ruining my life!"

Riki barely heard Bean, his eyes were focused on Cal, who was now lying on his side and panting as blood spread across the front of his jumpsuit. He started to go to him, but the whiz of a laser beam sliced past his ear.

"Look at me!" Bean screamed. "You will look at me, Pet! I am the Furniture in this house now, not him! He is nothing!" Bean glanced down and kicked Cal so the young man rolled onto his stomach. "Do you hear me? This is not his place. This will never be his! You have both brought shame on the house of Mink and the name of Furniture!"

"You are the only shameful one here, cretin!"

Bean had only a moment to register Yielia before a blast of power threw him across the room and out into the barrier of the balcony, where he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Riki immediately rushed to Cal's side and gently turned the boy over. "Help him!"

"Yes, I will try," Yielia agreed quietly and her hands started to glow.

She had woken up to strange sounds and had immediately rushed to the door of her room, only to find it had been secured and a field erected. She had no doubt that it had been Gideon who had trapped her inside, perhaps as punishment for her earlier words, she would deal with him later. It had taken her precious time to find a spell that could break the barrier and free her so she could aid her Prince.

"I am sorry, Maku," she said and sat back on her heels, her hands returning to normal.

"Keep going! What are you doing, keep going!"

"It is too much for my magic. Perhaps the Queen can help him?"

"You mean bring him to Avalon?"

“It would be the only way, but I cannot be sure he would survive the trip.”

“What...what about me? Can you use my magic?”

Yiela shook his head. “Yours magic is still unknown and unstable, it may do more harm than good. I am sorry.”

Because he blew off his training, Riki thought and cursed himself. If he had listened to Yiela, if he had stopped thinking about himself for one damn minute maybe he could save Cal. “Then we...we’ll put him in a healing chamber and...and bring him to Avalon and...”

“No.” Cal’s bloody hand reached up and touched Riki’s cheek. “I wish to die here, where I lived. Where I was happy and...where I was...needed.”

Riki pulled Cal into his arms, cradled him. “You can’t do this, you can’t leave me.”

“Leave you? Never.” He wasn’t in his right mind. Cal could feel the thoughts he had been so careful to bury merging with those that reminded him of his duty, blurring the lines, fuzzing his emotions. Is this what death felt like? This odd, floaty feeling and loss of self-control? He sighed, then looked the blood soaking the front of his tunic. “Oh dear. This will never come out.”

“Really? That’s what you’re worried about?”

“A proper Furniture must... always be properly attired.” Cal stiffened slightly. “Oh, I think... I’ve made a mess.”

Riki wasn’t quite sure what that meant but then Cal’s eyes closed and he went limp. “No...No! Cal! Cal!” Riki shook the young man but there was no response.

Iason stared at the carnage of broken and bloody bodies that now littered the factory floor. They had managed to dispatched the majority of the

assailants that had broken in, but they had no way of know if there were more on the floors below, or the floors above, which worried Iason more.

“I must get to Riki,” he decided as he stepped over the bodies and headed for the door.

“Wait, Iason!” Raoul demanded as he grabbed two rifles from the men on the floor and tossed one to him. “We go together. There may be more and we should check the lower floors first.”

Iason caught the weapon and nodded, then looked at Katze, who nodded. The black-market dealer knew his master well and understood his task would be to get to Riki.

“I need to check on my people,” Gideon stated and moved to the hidden passage. “I will meet you down there.” He paused and glanced back. “Iason? If we get through this, think better of me, would you. I dislike our being at odds.”

“I will consider it,” Iason tossed as he followed Raoul out of the room. “If the odds are in our favour.”

Iason and Raoul took the stairs down, as Katze started up. The elevator car was useless due to the blast the men had used to come in. They entered the second floor, found several employees stunned or unconscious on the floor, but most it seemed had managed to get out. They swept the area, then took the stairs down to the main floor.

“I don’t like this,” Raoul murmured as he kept his eyes open and his weapon trained for the slightest movement. It is too quiet now.”

“Perhaps there was only that one wave.” Iason kicked open the door to the break room, and nearly had his head taken off by the blast of laser fire that responded.

“Drop it, Issac!” He ordered as he and Raoul stood on either side of the door. He had only a glimpse of a cloaked and masked figure inside the room, but he knew it had to be Issac. “You are not well!”

“Come to meet your doom, Blondie?” the dark voice called back and another volley of laser fire followed. “I will give you a chance, if you like.”

“Are you offering to negotiate?” Iason made a hand gesture to Raoul and the Blondie slunk away to find another way into the break room. “What do you propose?”

“Drop your weapon, and your pants. Let me fuck you and I might let you live.”

Iason was shocked at the request, but he could not appear weak. “Is that really something you want, Issac? You know that Jupiter is causing you to think this way.”

“Jupiter? Who is Jupiter? I am not Issac, I am the Shadow and you will come on my terms. Oh yes, you will come, Iason Mink. Screaming if I have my way.”

“I have no objections to your request.” Come on Raoul, Iason thought bitterly. “But I would prefer a nicer setting. Will you not lay down your weapon so we can speak as brothers?”

The Shadow rubbed at his head. “I...I am not your brother...”

“You are my brother. You are my dear brother Issac. You are confused. Let me help you and...”

“Shut up! You are no brother to me! You left me! You took everything...” The Shadow shook his head and quickly regained control. “The time for such things are past. Come out Iason, come out and we will talk.”

Iason opened his mouth to respond and heard a muffled sound, then a curse and laser fire. He moved in to find Raoul and the cloaked figure grappling. His brother had come in through the outside window, and had obviously taken Issac by surprise, but Blondies were evenly matched so Iason had to make his move or risk both of them getting hurt.

He lifted his weapon, preparing to take Issac down but he could not get a good shot, and then suddenly Issac broke free and Raoul was hurtling towards Iason. Iason had no choice but to drop his weapon in an attempt to catch his brother, and they both ended up sprawled on the floor.

Issac had pulled off his mask and now started giggling. “Oh, that was wonderful! It’s so funny! I wish I could have planned it. Raoul flew like a bird and now the two of you on the floor and...” A strange, confused look came over Issac’s face, and then he picked up his weapon, aimed it. “Make it stop, Iason. You’re the one making it hurt, you have to stop it!”

Raoul carefully climbed off Iason and Iason raised his hands as he slowly rose.

“I am not doing this, Issac. It is Jupiter.”

“No. No! He said it’s you! He said if I found you it would stop. Make it stop, Iason!”

“Who said I could make it stop, Issac? Who are you talking about?”

“The boy! The boy understands, he is the only one. I took him from that place. It wasn’t a place for him.” Issac ran a gloved hand through his hair, but his weapon remained steadily pointed at the two Blondies. “You can make it stop. Make it stop damn you!”

Iason felt a shudder of foreboding and suddenly his need to get to Riki increased tenfold. He didn’t have the time to deal with this. “I can make it stop,” Iason agreed as he stepped forward. “Let me make it stop, Issac.”

“Iason?” Raoul warned, wondering what his brother was up too.

“Come to me, Issac, as you always have. Come to me and let me help you.”

Issac’s weapon hand twitched and for a single moment he actually looked like the Blondie they all knew and loved. “Iason. Iason why? Why did you hurt me?” Pain lanced through his head and he groaned. “Why did you do this to me?”

“I am sorry. I can make it stop. Come to me, let us make up, brother.”

Raoul suddenly realized the position that Iason was slowly placing himself in. “Iason, no!”

Issac looked at Raoul, startled, and Iason lunged. One quick twist was all it would take, he thought. He knew he would regret his actions, but he had to get to Riki.

However, Raoul’s warning raised Issac’s suspicion and he leapt backwards, away from his brother’s lethal hands. The pain in his head increased again and he screamed at Iason.

“Damn you!”

Issac pulled the trigger and Iason had an instant to prepare for the possibility of his death, but then the instant passed and he realized he was still standing.

“Gideon!” Raoul rushed towards the Blondie that had thrown himself between Issac’s weapon and Iason Mink. He caught his brother as Gideon slid to the floor, the top part of his head had been blasted away. “Gideon!”

Iason also crouched beside them, staggered that Gideon had sacrificed himself. “Brother? Gideon?” He looked at Raoul, appalled. “Can you... Raoul...?”

Raoul’s hands shook as he put them to Gideon’s head and he felt the wet, warm liquid soak through his gloves. “No...No, I...” He lifted his grief-stricken gaze to Iason’s. He and Gideon had fallen out, but he was still a Blondie. Still his brother. Unable to hold Iason’s hardening, cold gaze he glanced at the opening of the wall behind them. Gideon must have come through that passage.

Iason moved with the speed of a bullet and had disarmed Issac in an instant, fully prepared to carry out his original intention and rip the Blondie’s head off, but his hands paused as he saw the confused devastation in Issac’s eyes.

The madness was still there, but Issac was staring at Gideon's body now, seemed transfixed by it. A sound started in his throat, a low, moan that became a keening wail and then he gripped his hair and started screaming as he fell to his knees.

Both Blondie's experience their first moment of true terror at the unlikely sound coming from the Blondie's mouth and then Issac's eyes rolled up and he fell face forward, his black gloved hand reaching out for his dead brother.

Raoul looked up at Iason. "What? What have we done?"

Iason's eyes turned to ice. "Deal with this. I have to find Riki."

Laughter, raw maniacal laughter caused Riki and Yielia to glance towards the balcony where Bean had regained his feet and once again had the laser rifle in his hands.

"What's the matter, *pet*? Did you lose your toy?" Bean's laughter grew and as Yielia stood and raised her hand he hit her with a blast from the rifle, dropping her to the floor. "No, not again, bitch."

Riki jumped to his feet but paused as the rifle was aimed at him. "Stop this, Bean. I order you to stop!"

"Do you think I would ever take orders from you? You're just a mongrel pet. I have a new Master now and he will reward me so very well for bringing him your head." Bean sobered and stared hard at Riki. "You thought I'd die, didn't you? Crawl off and kill myself if your mongrel friends didn't kill me first, but I'm stronger than that. I let them do whatever they wanted to me, and then I made them pay, one by one they paid and now all of you will pay too."

"You're fucking crazy."

“I am Iason Mink’s Furniture!” Bean screamed, then just as quickly calmed again. “And you, are just his dead pet.”

Riki closed his eyes as Bean fired the weapon but was surprised when he felt no pain. He opened his eyes and found Cal, standing in front of him. “No, *Cal...*”

Cal’s front and back were deep, crimson red, yet he stood as straight as an arrow in front of Riki. “You are evil,” he ground out as he took a faltering step towards Bean. “You...are...wrong.” Riki cried out a laser beam sliced through Cal’s shoulder, then his hip. The young man barely flinched and kept moving toward Bean.

“Stop it!” Bean cried and continued to fire as he backed up.

Cal increased his pace. “I am the... only Furniture h...here.”

“Die already! Just die will you!”

“I’m...already...dead,” Cal whispered and suddenly threw himself at Bean. “And so...are you.”

Riki rushed forward and missed catching hold of Cal by less than an inch as both boys went over the balcony’s barrier. “NO!” He put his hands over the barrier, tried calling up his power, *any* power to catch them as he had seen Yielo once do with Bean.

His hand glowed green for a moment and then fizzled out. “*CAL!*” he screamed into the void as the two bodies fell, until they became mere specs against the backdrop of the surrounding buildings. He wouldn’t be able to see them hit, but he would know they had.

He sobbed and slid down the barrier, curling into himself.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am so sorry. This was the hardest chapter I've written for the entire series.

Chapter 42

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul makes a nice discovery and Riki tries to deal with his grief.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so very much for all the wonderful comments. Believe it or not, this story was only supposed to be 30 chapters, and here we are now at 42. Sigh, has a mind of it's own, however the end is in sight so I thank you for all your support. :-)

Raoul parked the vehicle he had liberated in the lot of the building which held his secret lab, not in the least to find the parking area deserted. There was too much turmoil going on in Midas and Tanagura for anyone to bother with a pet party or discuss business over a drink.

Still, he pulled his hair back into a quick plait then tucked it beneath an old hat that had been in the car. He completed his makeshift disguise with a pair of sunglasses that had been hooked on the visor, then stepped out. It was a huge risk to come here. The attack at Gideon's proved that they were vulnerable in any of the known areas, but he had equipment here that could prove useful in their coming battle with Jupiter.

Keeping his senses attuned to the slightest movement or sound, he moved towards the building and stepped inside, only mildly annoyed to find it unlocked. As he stepped into darkness, he chose not to bother with the lights because his Blondie vision enabled him to see perfectly well without them.

As he suspected, the tables and booths were empty, as was the bar area and stages. It was eerily quiet and he felt a flicker of discontent as he considered the money he was losing with an empty club. Moving towards the back, he started down the stairs and entered the code to open the door to his lab. Once again, he stepped into darkness.

A red blast from a laser rifle zipped past his ear, missing him by inches.

“Stand where you are. You will come no further!”

“Peter?”

“S...Sir?” The lights came on an instant later and Peter pulled off his night goggles as the weapon in his hand clattered to the floor. “Lord Am!”

The young Furniture rushed forward, as if to embrace the Blondie, then suddenly seemed to remember his position, stopped and lowered his head as he clasped his hands in front of him. “I...we were told you were dead, Sir.”

“I was.” Raoul stepped in, closed the door. “It didn’t suit me so I returned. What are you doing here, Peter?” His Furniture and pets should have been at his condo, it was well fortified and they would have been safe.

“Forgive me, Sir. I...I acted rashly and without proper authorization.”

“Did someone try to hurt you?”

Peter lifted his head and met Raoul’s gaze. “Not exactly.” He shifted in a sign of discomfort that was rare for the Furniture. “We received the news that Lord Lagnat had killed you and barely an hour afterwards, we were advised that the pets had been sold and I would be redistributed.”

Raoul’s eyes narrowed. “Sold to whom?”

“Lord Rodin, Sir. He arrived at the condo and demanded I turn the AnJell and Shira over to him. He said he had the right of claim and showed me a signed order from Lord Rodin. Peter shifted again, looked away, then squared his shoulders and faced his Master once more. “Forgive my arrogance, Sir, but I assumed that you would not wish for the pets to go

with Lord Rodin, given his recent infractions and your assuming ownership of AnJell."

Raoul crossed his arms over his chest, intrigued. "You refused an order from an Elite?"

"No, Sir! I would never be so impertinent!"

"Then Rodin has my pets?" Raoul was incensed at the idea, but he had to reject going after the Elite as the war against Jupiter would have to take precedence.

"Not exactly."

"That is twice you have used that phrase, Peter. Where *exactly* are my pets?"

"They're asleep on the lab beds inside, Sir."

Raoul blinked and tried to assimilate what Peter was being told. "Did you not just inform me that Rodin claimed them?"

"Yes, that is true, however I asked that I be allowed to assist the pets in gathering their things and..." Peter found a spot on the wall particularly interesting for a moment, then dropped to his knees and bowed his head. He continued in a rush of words. "I used the bedroom portal to transport to the garage and then destroyed the mechanism for it. From there I illegally appropriated a vehicle, as I was concerned they would be able to trace any of yours and then I drove here with Anjell and Shira and this is where we have remained because, although Lord Rodin is an Elite, I could not turn them over to that barbaric Ruby and I did not wish to be redistributed!"

Raoul studied him quietly. "Why did you do all this?"

""My job is to protect the pets, Sir, and..." Peter took a deep breath and finished in an incredibly soft tone. "I would rather be terminated than redistributed, for I have only one Master."

Peter had been with Raoul since the mongrel was ten, when his name had been Paul, and he remained to serve the Blondie for the next twelve years. Even before the new Furniture age law was reinstated, Raoul had protected Peter by insisting that the boy was actually a clone of Raoul's former Furniture, Paul, thus the similarity in appearance. As Raoul was a masterful geneticist and from whom most Elites purchased their pets, it was not such a leap to assume the Blondie had also created a Furniture for himself. Peter was small of stature and so it was not difficult for most to believe he was still a child and not a man of twenty-two.

Peter remained kneeling on the floor, his head bowed as he awaited his punishment and was therefore shocked when he felt a large, cool hand ruffle his hair.

“You did well.”

Peter glanced up. “Sir?”

Raoul knew that aside from Iason, Peter was the one person who was unwaveringly loyal to him. He thought about Cal’s senseless death, who’s loyalty to Iason and Riki had been powerful enough to warrant sacrificing his own life, and then considered how Peter had rushed towards him when he had first entered. He’d never been particularly affectionate with Peter, yet Peter, even when the Furniture believed Raoul dead, continued to serve to the best of his ability.

“Rise, Peter, the floor is no place for you.”

“Sir?”

“Wake AnJell and Shira while I gather some things. We will leave this place and you will resume your place at my side.” He smiled, ruffled Peter’s perfect hair again. “Where you belong.”

“Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir!”

“Incidentally,” Raoul said before Peter could hurry off to do his bidding. “How did you get into this building? It was coded with a security shield.”

“Oh.” Peter reached into his pocket and pulled out a small handheld device. “I used your Master decoder, Sir.”

Raoul’s eyes widened as he reached for the device he had created over a decade ago, designed to reset any code or disburse any impenetrable field. It had never seemed to work properly and he had put it aside a few years ago to work on other projects. He had completely forgotten about it.

“How did you get it to work?”

Peter blinked, confused. “I followed the directions that you had written beside it on the shelf, Sir.”

“The directions were invalid. It didn’t work, hasn’t worked since I made it.”

Peter tilted his head. “I don’t understand, Sir. It removed the garage field and the security measures for both the upper entrance to the bar and your laboratory.”

“Tell me what you did, exactly what you did.”

“I pressed the yellow button to turn it on and it immediately found the required frequencies, then I adapted the frequency to 1.36 higher, as stated in the notes, then I pressed the red and blue switches together.”

“Together?” Raoul started to smile. “You pressed them together?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“My instructions did not say to do that?”

“Oh, well, the instructions were slightly illegible for that particular part, but I did see the red and blue button and I assumed it was meant to be pressed together.”

Raoul chuckled. “Peter, the blue button was to activate, the red button was actually to destroy the device itself, and the person holding it. I included it to prevent theft, as it could be dangerous in the wrong hands.” He watched his Furniture’s eyes widen.

“Oh...well. That wasn’t my intention at all, Sir!”

“You say that pushing them both together will dissolve the security and unlock any codes then?”

“So far, Sir.” Peter swallowed as he realized how close he had come to dying by not being able to read Raoul’s notes.

“This is good, Peter.” Raoul slid the device into his pocket and hoped, with a bit of adjustment, he could use it for their plans. “This is very, very good. Now go get the others while I see what else we need.”

Peter rushed to the inner room to wake the pets as Raoul made a quick inventory of his equipment.

When Raoul arrived at Dana Bahn, his android vision detected a nearly invisible field around it. Grinning, he pulled out the device, and activated it as Peter had instructed. Sure enough, the field fizzled and then disappeared.

“Lovely.”

“Master?” Shira asked, sleepily. “Why are we here? It looks so dirty.”

“It’s just for a short while, pet,” he assured as Peter grabbed two of the bags from the back, pleased that AnJell moved to help him. “We won’t have to stay here long.” He reached in and picked up the remaining two bags, then stepped back as the dirt at his feet exploded. Casting his gaze upwards, he searched for the sniper, but Katze was too good to be seen easily. He remembered that he still wore the hat and glasses and quickly pulled them off.

“We come in peace!”

Katze appeared atop a broken pillar and lowered his weapon. “Raoul?” He glanced at the others and scowled. “Are you insane, bringing them here?”

“You forget yourself, Katze!” Peter scolded even as Raoul grinned.

“It’s fine, Peter.” The Blondie started walking towards the ruins as Katze made his way down. “Did you miss me?”

“Why are they here, Raoul?” Katze demanded as he carefully dropped down beside the Elite. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It was more dangerous to leave them behind.” He handed one of the bags he was carrying to Katze. “How long did it take you to erect that security shield?”

“A little over an hour. What did you do to it?”

“I’ll explain later. Let’s get inside and put a better one in its place.”

“There was nothing wrong with that one!”

“It wouldn’t last beyond a few blasts with a phaser cannon.”

“I’m doing what I can with what I have, Raoul,” Katze grumbled as they started the climb back over the rubble and he turned back to offer Shira a hand up.

“Well, now you will have more so we can make a better one.” Raoul made sure that his pets and Furniture okay with the climb, then he made his way up. At the top, he jumped down the several meters to the other side, then dropped the bag and lifted his hands. “Come to me pet.”

Shira giggled and leapt off the top of the rubble pile and into his arms. He kissed the top of her head and set her on her feet, then commanded AnJell to do the same. Peter was nearly to the bottom when Raoul called to him, but the Furniture simply leapt the rest of the way and landed on his feet beside his Master.

“Show off,” Raoul teased and patted the young man’s shoulder before looking back at Katze who was slowly making his way down, carefully favoring his injured foot. “Jump, Katze.”

“No.”

“I promise to catch you.”

Katze ignored the gleam in the Blondie’s eyes. “I’m fine, go on ahead.”

Raoul’s grin faded in annoyance and he turned to Peter. “Go on in through that hole in the wall, turn left, and wait for me in that room.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Peter urged the pets forward and disappeared through the hole as Raoul started up the crumbling wall towards Katze.

“I said I’m fine,” Katze said when Raoul reached him and at that moment slipped on a piece of loose rock that sent him sliding forward into the Elite.

“Stop being so stubborn.” Raoul caught him, grabbed the bag and tossed it to the ground then picked Katze up in his arms and jumped.

Katze gritted his teeth when they landed on he ground. “Put me down.”

“In a minute.”

“Don’t...” Katze began but Raoul was already capturing his mouth and sending his senses reeling. His hands itched to move up around the Blondie’s neck, and because they did he crossed them firmly over his chest to avoid doing just that.

“Katze...” Raoul whispered when their lips parted.

“You shouldn’t have gone back to Tanagura,” Katze stated quietly. “You could have been captured or...”

“I didn’t go to Tanagura.” Raoul lowered Katze to the ground but kept his arms around the red-head’s waist. “Were you worried about me?”

“We can’t afford to lose anyone else.” Katze pushed away and picked up both bags. “And you could have brought trouble back with you.”

“You were worried about me.”

“No.” Katze limped towards the opening. “I’m worried we won’t be able to pull this off with just the few of us.”

Raoul followed. “I brought some equipment that may be able to increase our chances.”

“Really? And what are the pets for, to relieve your tension?”

“Well, it’s a thought., but no. I simply couldn’t leave them back there, Katze. They are my responsibility.”

“They’re not safe here!”

“They weren’t safe where they were either.”

Katze pulled out a hand-held torch to see in the darkness and found the Peter and the pets huddled just to the side, obviously unable to see well enough to follow their master’s instructions. “Just go straight,” he said shining the light ahead of him for them and they did as he advised. “Iason is not going to like this.”

It was several hours later when Shiao, Carrie and Ran’talgis arrived at Dana Bahn with a shuttle full of supplies. Raoul, having settled his pets and Furniture inside the ruins greeted them.

“You took your time.”

Shiao picked up one of the heavy supply cases. “Jupiter has ordered sentries to patrol the sector,” he stated. “Re had to take the ship further out, so we will be out of communication range for some time. I brought what was available.”

“When will he return?” Raoul demanded, as he picked up the case that Carrie and Ran’talgis carried between them.

“When he can.”

“Are you telling me that we now have no means of escape?”

“I am telling you the facts as I know them.” Shiao watched as the Blondie used a device to remove a portion of the field barrier he erected so they could enter the ruins of Dana Bahn. “He could not risk remaining and being arrested or detained.”

“Things are getting worse and worse.”

“We’re going in there?” Carrie asked, doubtfully as she stared at the maze of destroyed structures and mass of rubble.”

“It is not as bad on the other side,” Raoul assured as he hefted the supply case onto his shoulder and climbed up on the remains of a wall, then offered his hand down to her. “The explosions were contained mostly in the front quarter of buildings, so you just have to be careful in this area.”

Carrie ignored his hand and leapt up, quickly followed by the Dakfure that had come to take her back to a new home for their species. Ran’talgis had refused to stay on the ship and seemed unwilling to let her out of his sight. “I have no problem climbing,” she told him as they continued up and over the wreckage. “It just looks very unstable.” And filthy, she added silently. It was hard to believe a Blondie would consider staying in such a place.

“Thus far it is the only area Jupiter would not bother to look for us.”

“The dampers are still in place?” Shiao asked as they started down the other side of the rubble.

“Yes, though it is uncertain how long they will last.”

“Where’s Riki and Iason?” Carrie asked as they made it to the other side and stepped through an enormous hole in the wall of the remaining structure that was left standing. “Are they okay? Katze said something about an attack.”

“They are inside.” Raoul turned to look at her as they reached the bottom, wondering if he should warn her of Riki’s condition. “Yiela was injured in the attack but appears to be recovering.” He paused, surprised that it was difficult to get the next words out. “Cal is dead.”

Carrie stumbled back. “What? What?! How?”

“That is of little importance.” Raoul turned and started walking again through an intact doorway and into darkened interior. “Riki is still in shock over it and remains unresponsive.”

“Wait!”

Carrie hurried after him into the darkness, then paused as her eyes attempted to adjust to the pitch that was so black even her Dakfure vision could not cut through it. A sudden flare of red appeared behind her, she saw that Ran’talgis held up a small glowing stick that illuminated the passageway.

Raoul remained silent as they walked on through what seemed an endlessly winding corridor, before a light appeared up ahead and grew brighter as they neared it. A door, or what used to be a door, lay leaned against the outer wall of a large room, as if it had been either blown off or ripped off and then gently placed close to the exit as a reminder.

“Carrie.” Iason stepped forward and surprised them all by embracing the woman. “Riki is not well. I cannot get him to respond to me. It’s been hours.”

She lifted a hand to his cheek. “Is it true? Is Cal really dead?”

“It is, yes.”

She heaved a heavy breath, then nodded. “Let me see what I can do.”

He guided her out through another doorway, the rooms in here were in much better shape, and indicated the mongrel lying on a bench by the wall. Yiela was curled on the floor beside her Prince, her expression grim. Guy

was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed and his expression full of anger and helplessness. They had all tried to get Riki to respond and he would not. This woman was perhaps their last hope, for Iason knew that Riki cared greatly for Carrie.

“Riki?” Carrie crouched down beside him, caressed his forehead. His skin was ice cold and he didn’t react at all when she touched him. She turned to Iason. “There are some heated blankets in the supplies we brought, bring me one. And also a bottle of water.”

Iason nodded and went to retrieve the items.

“Riki, honey, look at me. It’s Carrie.” Nothing. Riki’s dark eyes continued to stare up at the cracked and peeling ceiling of the room. “Riki, I’m sorry about Cal but you can’t stay like this.”

Biting her lip, she glanced around the room, wondering what else she could do and spotted Ran’talgis by the door. “Stop following me, damn it. I’m not going back with you!”

She rose with a sudden fury and started to shove him out but stumbled over some loose debris. Scowling she bent down and picked up the small round objects, sniffed. Fire pods, she realized. As she straightened she walked back over to Riki, struck one of the pods against the wall and watched a flame spark and burn. She quickly blew it out then placed it under Riki’s nose.

At first there was no reaction from the sulfuric smell, but then Riki’s head started to turn away.

“No you don’t,” she warned and cupped his cheek to turn him back to her as Iason returned with the blanket and water. “Look at me, Riki. Stay here. I know it hurts but you have to stay here, baby.”

A single tear slid down Riki’s cheek as Iason quickly placed the blanket over him and crouched beside Carrie.

“Cal,” Riki whispered and the devastation in his voice almost killed her.
“Cal.”

“I know, baby.” She pulled him into a sitting position, arranged the blanket around him and settled on the bench so she could wrap him in her arms. “I know.” She looked at Iason and he understood the plea in her eyes. Riki would not, could not grieve with an audience.

“Leave us,” he said to Guy and Yielia.

“No way!” Guy refused, even as Yielia rose, for the woman had also come to understand her Prince’s pride. She touched his arm, looked back at Riki.

“He cannot do what he must with us here.”

“That’s bullshit. I’m his friend!”

“I said leave!” Iason demanded, and then lowered his voice when he saw Riki flinch. “For pity’s sake, do as you are told for once.”

“Guy?” Shiao stood in the doorway. “This is for them, come away now.”

Guy was horrified by the state Riki had been in and riddled with guilt after he learned what had happened. Regardless of past mistakes, Riki was his friend and his mentor and it was hard to see him like this.

Yielia tugged on Guy’s sleeve and he reluctantly left the room with her. Shiao closed the door to the room, leaving only Iason and Carrie alone with Riki who remained tense and immobile in her arms.

Exchanging a look with Iason as he settled on the opposite side of Riki, she quietly began to sing.

*When the day is long
And the night
The night is yours alone
When you're sure you've had enough
Of this life
Well hang on*

Don't let yourself go
'Cause everybody cries
And everybody hurts sometimes

Sometimes everything is wrong
Now it's time to sing along

She felt Riki's fingers curl into her shirt, and then his arms slid around her neck as his body shook with grief.

When your day is night alone
If you feel like letting go
If you think you've had too much
Of this life
Well, hang on

'Cause everybody hurts
Take comfort in your friends
Everybody hurts
Don't throw your hand
Don't throw your hand
If you feel like you're alone
No, no, no, you're not alone

Carrie began to gently sway as Riki's gut wrenching sobs filled the silence in the room and Iason started to rub his back as Yielo had done.

If you're on your own
In this life
The days and nights are long
When you think you've had too much
Of this life
To hang on

Well, everybody hurts sometimes

Everybody cries

And everybody hurts sometimes

And everybody hurts sometimes

So, hold on, hold on

Hold on, hold on

Hold on, hold on

Hold on, hold on

Everybody hurts

You are not alone

Carrie continued the song until finally Riki's crying started to ebb and his trembling eased.

Riki's cheek was pressed to Carrie's chest as he slowly turned his head to stare at Iason. "He's dead." Riki turned his face into Carrie's chest but he had no tears left to spill. If this was what it was to feel love, real love, he didn't want it. He didn't want any of it. It was better the other way, better to only feel anger and hate and resentment.

"That is not your fault, Riki," Carrie stated quietly, assuming that Riki was blaming himself for what had happened. "None of this is your fault."

No, Riki agreed silently. It wasn't his fault that Cal was dead, but he had a part in allowing it to happen and he would have to live with that. He would have to live with the fact that his selfishness, his pride had lead to the death of the sweetest, purest person he had ever known, and he would live with it, because he also had a new target. Jupiter. Jupiter would pay for all of this. She would pay.

"I should have been with you." Iason said when Riki still refused to speak, yet continued to cling to Carrie. He expected to feel jealousy but he was too desperate to worry about such things. Riki's condition had frightened him. Riki's lack of response had left him feeling helpless and emasculated. "I should never have left you."

Yes, Riki thought. Iason should have stayed there at the condo instead of going off with his brothers, going off to do ‘Blondie business’ but even this admission from Iason did nothing to help Riki now. Iason wasn’t there. Guy wasn’t there. It was just him and Cal and Yielia to fend off a squadron of attackers; and they had almost done it.

“Riki?” Iason caressed his hair. “Riki, please say something.”

“He saved me. Bean stabbed him and shot him and he just kept going.” Riki gripped Carrie’s shirt as he continued to mumble against her shoulder. “I couldn’t save him. It was too fast, and I couldn’t catch him.”

If only he had listened to Yielia, had stopped brushing her off he might have had more control over his power. He might have been able to save Cal. If only he had listened to Iason and let the Blondie take care of punishing Bean, the little fucker wouldn’t have found his way back to them. “I fu...” He shut his eyes tightly, trying to dispel the image of Cal being shot multiple times, then falling off that damn building. He had truly fucked up this time and there was no going back.

He was filled with memories of his own arrogance, his own pride. Instances where he was too selfish to listen to anyone but himself, too stubborn not to argue and have his own way regardless of the consequences, then taking the easy way out. A spanking here, a humiliation there, what did it matter as long as he got his way. As long as he got one over on Iason Mink and showed that he was the better man.

Iason had watched the security footage Katze had procured before they left Gideon’s condo. He had witnessed for himself how Cal, injured, bleeding and probably already near death, pulled himself up off the floor and shoved himself between Riki and Bean, taking the first hit of the laser rifle. It should have killed him then, Iason thought, yet Cal had kept going. He held on until he knew that Riki was safe, and the only way ensure that was to put an end to Bean.

Iason couldn’t take anymore, he gathered Riki into his arms and held on tight. “I am so very sorry for your loss, my love,” he said, wishing that he could experience the same level of grief, if for no other reason than to

understand what Riki was going through. But he was a Blondie, and his emotions only went so deep. He would miss Cal very much, but he could not ache for him as he knew Riki was doing at that very moment. “He was very brave.”

“He’s dead.” Riki couldn’t take any more, he pushed away from Iason, from Carrie; away from the comfort that threatened to break him apart again and forced himself to push down on his tumultuous emotions. He needed rage, not grief. He needed hate not love. These were the tools he needed and he would get them back. “It doesn’t matter how brave he was if he’s dead.

“Riki!” Carrie gasped and bolted up. “I know you are upset but...”

“Do you?” He turned on her, his eyes filled with such hate she actually took a step back. “What do you know? You’re just an alien female caught in the middle of a war. You don’t know shit.”

“Riki!” It was Iason who rose this time. “That’s enough!”

“No. No it’s not enough. It will *never* be enough.” Riki stepped up to Iason, his eyes blazing with a fury that the Blondie had not seen since the first days of Riki’s entrapment as a pet. “I’m going to kill it, Iason.”

“Riki!” The Blondie was under no misassumption of who Riki spoke of and the fact that the Mongrel had refused the use of a pronoun for Jupiter shocked him.

“I know you still have reservations about Jupiter and that’s why you’re just trying to trap it, but I promise you, it ends here. She, it, the fucking killer AI ends here.”

“Riki, you don’t understand what you are saying. Jupiter cannot be...”

“Choose!” Riki almost screamed at him, then lowered his voice again to the lethal quiet that Riki the Dark was known for. “You choose, Iason. Me, or Jupiter.”

Iason tried to comprehend what Riki was saying. His lover was distraught and grieving, or so he believed, but the look on Riki's face was not one of sorrow but of determined loathing. It was true that, despite their plans, his intent had been to capture Jupiter in a vessel where She could not use Her telepathic abilities. He had questions that he needed answers to, and only Jupiter could provide those answers. How had Riki known he would not willingly destroy the AI?

"Make your choice, Iason. I won't ask you again."

Carrie looked back and forth between the two, wondering what the hell was going on. She had expected Riki to be upset, perhaps even to blame himself for Cal's death, as was his way, but this wasn't blame or guilt. This was something else entirely, a Riki she had never experienced before and she wasn't entirely sure how to handle it. His comment had not hurt her, because she knew that inside he was hurting and hadn't really meant it, but now he was fighting with Iason, so she didn't know what to do.

Iason grabbed Riki by the shoulders, pulled him roughly up to his toes so they were almost eye to eye. "If I do not choose?" he demanded. "You dare to give me ultimatums?"

"I'm giving you a choice."

"And if I do not choose as you wish, what then? You will leave me? I will not allow that, Riki. I will never allow that."

"I'm telling you, Iason," Riki replied without an inch of fear at the Blondie's wrath. "Jupiter is going down, all the way down and if you are not on board with it, you need to back the fuck off and go some place else, because nothing, not the imposed hierarchy placed on us by a fucking machine, not the fact that you're a Blondie and not your demands as my Master will stop me."

"What of my love?" Iason snapped back and shook Riki a little, trying to make sense. "What of me as your mate? Does that mean nothing to you now?"

“It means everything, Iason.”

The Blondie paused, stunned at the simple unguarded truth in Riki’s words. “Riki...”

“I need you to choose because you mean everything, because I won’t... can’t lose anyone else.” Riki’s gaze softened just a fraction as his eyes darted towards Carrie. “No one else that I love will die because of Jupiter. It ends with us. She ends with us.” He looked up at Iason again. “Choose, Iason. Us or Her.”

Iason’s hard, gripping hands gentled against Riki’s arms. “You,” he said softly. “It will always be you, Riki.”

Riki wrapped his arms around Iason, pulled him down for a hard, quick kiss, then pulled back just enough that he could look up and see those beautiful blue eyes above him. “Cal...his body, did you...?”

“We brought him with us,” Iason assured. It had been a last-minute decision to take the young Furniture’s body with them to Dana Bahn, and Iason could admit that seeing Bean splattered all over the street was somewhat vindicating.

“I don’t want him recycled.” The idea of Cal’s body being pressed into a machine and made into organic mulch horrified him. He deserved better than that.

Iason had felt the same way. “No, but what else can we do? We cannot keep the body here for very long. Yielia has placed a preservation field around it but even then it will eventually...”

“No.” Riki shook his head and laid it back on Iason’s strong chest. “I want to bury him.”

“In the ground? A grave?” Iason caught Riki’s chin, lifted it. They had not buried bodies for centuries, it was a strictly Earthian tradition. “Where did you get that idea?”

“The garden, on Avalon. They put a memorial there, but also Celestia said that they had placed the King next to their daughter in a grave with a memorial so she could visit them when she was lonely. I want to do that with Cal. Can we? Can we find someplace nice with a marble marker and his name?”

“Why?”

“I don’t want him to be forgotten. I don’t want him to just be another Furniture, because he wasn’t Iason.”

“Do you wish to bury him on Avalon?”

Riki shook his head. “Here. Here where his home is.” Riki remembered Cal’s last words. “Where he was happy and needed. That’s what he said.”

Iason glanced at Carrie whose eyes were shimmering with tears, then he looked back down at Riki. “Then we will find him a proper place and do as you ask, and when this is all over, we will build your memorial. All right?”

Riki nodded, numbly, then pushed back, swiped at his face. “I want to see him.”

“Riki, I don’t think...”

“Please, Iason. I...I need to see him.”

“Very well, but not right now.” Iason watched as Carrie offered him the bottle of water he had brought in. He uncapped it. “Drink some of this first, and then eat something. I will take you to see Cal after that.”

“I’m not hungry,” Riki said but he sipped the water to ease a throat that was raw from crying.

“You need to eat,” Carrie insisted as she slid her arm around Riki’s shoulders, proving that he was forgiven for his earlier remark. “Isn’t that the first thing Cal would tell you to do? Eat and keep up your strength?”

Riki slowly nodded. “Yeah. He...he was always trying to feed me.” He blinked as a fresh onslaught of tears surged into his eyes again as he remembered that Cal had been about to make him a chocolate cake before everything went to shit. Again he forced it back and let his grief feed his anger.

After several long, deep breaths, he finished off the water and handed the bottle back to Carrie. “Sorry I leaked all over you.”

“It’s fine.” She kissed his cheek. “I should be watered daily to maintain my youthful good looks.”

He didn’t smile, as she intended but he stood a little straighter. “I’m okay. The others?”

“They’re in the other chamber.” Iason touched Riki’s shoulder.

“Re had to take the ship and flee the sector due to Jupiter’s patrols,” Carrie advised.

“Is he coming back?”

“He will when it is safe.”

“Safe.” Riki mulled over the word. Would any of them ever be safe again. He ran his hands over his face and attempted to regroup; he would be useless if he couldn’t get a handle on himself. “Any idea how Bean found us?”

“Not specifically,” Iason stated. “But he was working with Issac.”

“Issac? So you confirmed it was him?”

“Yes, he is the one, or so it seems, behind the attack on our condo and the one at Gideon’s building.” As he watched the rage flow into Riki’s eyes, Iason laid a hand on his shoulder. “He is not responsible for his actions, Riki. Jupiter’s madness had corrupted him nearly beyond reason.”

“Is he dead?”

“No, but he is incapacitated.”

Riki’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me you brought him here?” He paused and looked around. “Where the hell are we, anyway?”

“Dana Bahn.”

A sour taste rose in Riki’s mouth as he remembered the last time they had been in this place. “Well, that just tops the cake.” He winced as he thought of Cal, pushed it back. “So, was Issac attacking you while Bean was attacking us?”

“More or less.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Anyone else? Katze?”

“Gideon is dead, the rest are uninjured.”

“Oh.” Riki didn’t give one sweet fuck about Gideon Lagnat, but he supposed he should say something since Gideon was Iason’s brother. “Sorry.”

“You’re not but thank you anyway.”

“Yiela was shot...”

“She has managed to heal herself and is recovering.”

“Oh.” Riki sank down on the bench, suddenly exhausted. They were down two people, although he had never trusted Gideon so he wasn’t sure if the Blondie had even been incorporated into their plans. Cal had been a big part of them, though, and they would have to find a way to fill that hole. “So, what do we do now?”

“We get you something to eat.”

“What about Jupiter? What about...?”

“We will deal with it, Riki,” Iason promised and meant it.

Before Riki he had never known pain or regret. Before Riki he had never considered being associated with anyone other than his own kind, but over time he had accepted and came to depend on Riki and Raoul and Carrie. And Cal. Sweet, wonderful Cal. Jupiter would pay for all She had done. The last vestiges of doubt, the last scrap of loyalty he felt for the one who had created him died when he watched his lover fall apart after losing a boy more innocent, more pure than any of them could hope to be.

Chapter 43

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki returns to Ceres

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay everyone, I was out of town for a week and when I got back I had so much to do I had no chance to update. To make up for it I will upload two chapters. but please review each one individually. Thank you all for the wonderful comments from the last chapter! Cheers!

A good crowd of mongrels had gathered in the one park in Ceres, many just for the chance to see the legendary Riki the Dark. The infamous leader of Bison had disappeared from Ceres years ago, then came back for a time before leaving again. Some were admirers of Riki, others were looking for an edge to beat the mongrel's reputation.

The rumors about Riki had been wild and numerous. Some said that he was working for the underground, some said he had found a woman and ran away with her. One had him hiding out after murdering an Elite in Midas and robbing him of thousands of credits while another claimed he was leading a revolt off planet. There was even one that claimed Riki the Dark was the pet of a Blondie, but very few people believed that one.

Regardless of what had happened to him or where he had been, Riki the Dark was still the most famous mongrel in all of Ceres. Although other gangs had risen up to rule the slums, none of them matched the power and guile of Bison, which meant that all the new gangs were either being compared to or aspired to be better than the legend Bison had left behind.

When Guy had come to see them the day before, he had garnered a huge crowd of his own. As part of Bison and Riki the Dark's pairing partner, Guy

had a substantial following as well, but he had spoken of a serious score against the establishment and mongrels were wary of what seemed like a highly concentrated effort for a few bits of property and a handful of credits. A little theft here or there to get by on, a little vandalism to make a point was one thing, but what Guy had spoken of was beyond their scope or their desire to be included. Being intentionally suppressed for more than a century was a deliberate ploy by the Elites to make mongrels lazy and disinterested in the world outside of the slums and thus thwart any thought of revolution, but many mongrels felt the opposite and would kill for a chance for a real score, or just to put one over on the Establishment. The problem, of course, was they usually had to count on their fists or handmade weapons and were no match for the authorities if they were caught, therefore most mongrels had dismissed Guy's idea as foolish and not worth their time.

However, when Riki the Dark showed up, no mongrel could resist checking out what he had to say, even if it was the same shit that they had already dismissed. The crowd that gathered for him was more than double the one that Guy had spoken to, in fact, it was possible every mongrel in Ceres had come out for Riki. But Riki was indeed offering the same deal that Guy had done the day before, and as admired, respected and yes, feared, as Riki was, he was still getting some push back from his people.

"All you have to do is cause as much shit as possible between one and two am tomorrow morning." Riki insisted as he stood on a makeshift platform in the middle of the park, surrounded almost on all sides, with Guy just a few feet behind him, ready and prepared to brawl if necessary, just as they had in the old days.

Riki wasn't stupid. He had been away from Ceres for years, and his reputation would only get him so far. Yes, he had been the legendary leader of the toughest gang in Ceres, but there were others that wanted that role and wouldn't hesitate to kill him to get it. Iason had refused to let him come to the slums without some kind of protection, refused to understand that Riki had to go alone, or with just Guy or no one would listen to him. If he didn't prove he was strong enough to face the hoards alone, no one would care.

Iason had been firm on accompanying Riki and so the Blondie parked his vehicle on the street, across from the park, where he could keep a close eye on his beloved, and had cracked the window so he could hear what was being said. He had engaged the one way privacy screens on the windows prevented anyone from seeing in, but would still allow him to see out.

“What’s in it for us?” one mongrel shouted above the crowd.

“A chance to stick it to the Darkmen!”

“Fuck that!” Another refused. “We get caught and they’ll break us to pieces, probably kill us. You know what they’re like!”

Riki did know. He’d been on the receiving end of the Midas Division of Public Safety security force more than once, and the last time it had been only his pet registration and Iason’s interference that saved him and his gang from death. Of course, Iason had set the whole thing up for them to get caught so he could blackmail Riki into returning to Eos with him, but the simple truth of the matter is that the MDPS, or Darkmen as they were casually called, had carte blanche to do whatever they wanted to mongrels if they were caught breaking the law, and that sometimes included being beaten to death. The Tanagura Division of Public Safety was nothing to laugh at either, but they weren’t as brutal and unforgiving as the Midas cops.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Riki sneered and placed his hands on his hips. “This meeting is for mongrels. All you pussies can crawl back into your holes and continue sucking your own dicks.”

There were several chuckles at this and then another mongrel called out.

“I don’t have a problem going up against the Darkmen, I’ve fought those fuckers before and would love to get a piece of my own back, but pussy’s got a point. Stickin’ it to them just to make a point or just on your say so ain’t worth the shit we’d go through if we get caught.”

“So don’t get caught, dickhead.”

“Their weapons can take two or three of us out at a time! We wouldn’t stand a chance!”

Riki tsked. “Did you all forget how to fucking think while I was away? Have I *ever* walked into a fight unprepared?”

“At least once,” Guy said from behind him and another round of laughter surfaced from the crowd as Riki kicked out at him. Guy chuckled and danced back out of range.

“Point is, even *unprepared*,” he eyed Guy stonily, but appreciated his old friend breaking some of the tension around them. “That one time, I still came out on top. I’m still here.”

“Yeah, but you want us to start this fight, but are you gonna be there to finish it?”

Riki knew he could not be, as he had to disable the main power grid, but rather than admit to it and show his weakness he slowly smiled. “I’ll be doing my part.”

“What part is that?”

“Yeah, where’s the risk for you?”

“Where you been all this time, man?” A mongrel with flaming red hair called. “How can we trust you when we don’t even know where you been?”

“I’ve been with your mother, Joey, she says hi and she really likes my cock.”

A few more chuckles filtered through the crowd but Joey had not appreciated the insult, regardless of the fact that he never knew his mother, saying shit about her was not cool. “You suck!”

“Oh yeah.” Riki just smiled. “She likes that too.”

“Mama boy’s right. How do we know you ain’t a sell out?”

“Sell out?” Riki growled and shot the last fellow his darkest look, pleased when the mongrel actually lowered his head and backed up a step. Yeah, you pissant, be afraid, I haven’t changed that much. His gaze flickered towards the vehicle parked just outside the park and felt a tinge of guilt at the fact that he had, in fact, sold out and was a pet to a Blondie, but he would never admit that to them. “Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?”

“A crowd of mongrels can’t just walk into Midas or Tanagura. No more than a handful of us can get cleared into either place without the MDPS being called in, so what do you expect so few of us to do?”

“I’m gonna make it so everyone will be passed through security.”

“How you gonna do that?”

“What’s in it for you?”

“What are you holding back from us, man?”

“Hey!” Riki barked when the questions and accusations began to rise again. “Shut the fuck up!” The mongrels started to settle down, but did not look happy about it, as Riki turned to one of those that had shouted at him. “You don’t need to know what’s in it for me, Glen, because your tiny mind couldn’t handle the answer. Look, I came here to make a deal on a once in a lifetime score and if you’re all to chicken shit too get onboard then you can go back to knocking the shit out of each other, fucking each other and barely scraping by. Do you think I could give a shit about any of you? Do you think I ever did?”

Silence reigned at his deliberate snub and people started shifting and growing angry.

“Why you gotta be like that man?”

“Who the fuck do you think *you* are?”

“Yeah! You used to be somebody, you ain’t no body now, motherfucker!”

Riki took two running steps across the platform, leapt and delivered a flying kick to the face of the last one who shouted. The heckling mongrel hit the ground hard as those around him quickly made a space to avoid the battle.

Dawes, the current leader of the top gang in Ceres, scrambled to his feet. He had only known Riki by reputation, and had, for the past two years, been touting himself as the toughest guy *ever* in Ceres, tougher even than Riki the Dark. Now, as he faced the legendary leader of Bison, all he could think was Riki the Dark was fucking *tiny!* How in the hell could this midget have held court over all of Ceres for so many years?

His right fist swung out and missed as Riki ducked, but his second fist was ready for the follow-through. He fully intended to make this *little* legend bleed but was shocked when Riki caught his swinging fist in one hand, twisted hard enough to nearly snap it off at the wrist and yanked him forward. Riki's knee came up into the mongrel's stomach with clenching depth.

Dawes' breath whooshed out in pain, surprised at the power behind the blow, and again swung at his opponent in a fierce fury of flying fists. Riki blocked the first two, reached past the man's attack and slapped him hard across the face, then he blocked a couple more and bitch-slapped the other cheek.

This was the height of humiliation in Ceres, to be slapped rather than punched and Dawes' fury grew at the surprising insult. He was the best fighter in Ceres, and this little wimpy shit was swatting at him like he was an annoying fly.

He growled and lunged at Riki who sidestepped with an easy stride and a look of boredom, then delivered a kick to the guy's passing ass.

“Fuck you, you motherfucking...” Dawes gaped as Riki punched him in the face and he felt the gush of blood flow from his nose and down into his open, snarling mouth.

Riki leaned down, grabbed the guy by the shirt front and hauled him up, only to deliver a bone crunching punch to the mongrel's ribs. He pulled

Dawes close enough that they were practically kissing and sneered into his face and whispered

“I’m just getting warmed up, baby.” Riki licked the mongrel’s cheek in a slow, deliberate tasting. “You bleed real nice. I bet you’ll taste even better once we get more of it flowing.”

Dawes felt a little tickle of piss run down the inside of his leg. At six three, he was built like a brick shit house and tough as nails. He had been in dozens of fights and had won every last one of them. No one was meaner or stronger than him, and yet he was being held up by a guy that that was only half his size who had just kicked the shit out of him and wasn’t even out of breath.

“S...I’m sorry,” he managed through the pain in his ribs and the agony of his broken nose.

“What was that?”

“I...I’m sorry for...for doubting you, Riki.”

“Apology accepted.” Riki released the Dawes’ shirt and let the mongrel drop onto the ground as he stepped over him and hopped up on the platform again.

His heartrate was thudding so hard inside his chest he was worried it might actually break out of his ribcage. Hurting the mongrel hadn’t been his plan, but he couldn’t afford to ignore such a direct challenge. A guy’s reputation could only carry him so far, and he had been away for a long time. Appearing weak or accepting shit from anybody would only defeat his purpose of being here. He had to regain their respect, and if that didn’t work, their fear, because he needed them to bring Jupiter down.

No one helped Dawes up, and Riki knew the gang leader could expect fallout from losing the battle, but nor did anyone harass him or outwardly shun him. “We can catch the cops by surprise. They can only handle a small group of us, which is why they made that stupid mongrel limitation rule.”

“How you gonna do that?”

“It doesn’t matter how, you only need to know that I’ll do it.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” Riki countered easily.

He couldn’t tell them the real reason because most mongrels were out for themselves and their plan would be in Jupiter’s hands by the end of the day, all for a few credits in their pocket. He shrugged nonchalantly and shoved his hands into his jacket pockets.

“But, hey, if you don’t want to be part of possibly the biggest score in history...” Another shrug as he turned his back to him, something a mongrel rarely did on anyone, because it was a sign that either you were very stupid, or you were very, very confident no one would attack you.
“You’re loss.”

“What kinda score we talking here?” one of them demanded.

“You keep whatever you can grab.”

“Yeah, right. The Darkmen will come down on all of us...”

“The Darkmen will have bigger fish to fry than a few thieving mongrels and I’m done talking. We dealing or not?”

After a general consensus of head nodding from his audience, Riki hopped down, followed by Guy and they moved through the crowd to the parked car where Iason sat, invisible to the other mongrels. Guy reached the vehicle first, popped the trunk and retrieved a top of the line, and highly illegal stun rifle, which he tossed to Riki.

Riki caressed the weapon like he would a lover, cocked it, and aimed it at the crowd. No one moved, not from fear but from greed. A weapon like that would be powerful indeed and could change the entire structure of mongrel society. “Who wants a shiny new toy?”

A man named Farrell was the first to break from the crowd and walk to Riki, pausing a few feet away as Riki adjusted the weapon, ever so slightly, in his direction. “You sayin’ we get to use these? All of us?”

“All of you, no. Some of you, yes.” No way Riki was going to arm every single mongrel, that would cause a civil war and the streets of Ceres would be lined with blood. “They have a limited charge, so if you’re stupid about it, like shooting anything that moves, or even each other, you’ll only pay for it later by not having the power when you need it.”

“What about the rest of us?”

“What about you? Are you so pathetic that none of you have your own weapons?”

“Not like that.”

Riki pushed the safety on the rifle and tossed it to Farrell. “Are you in or not.”

Farrell looked over the weapon in his hands, enjoying the feel of it, and slowly nodded.

“Good.” Riki glanced at the others. “Anyone else willing to deal, or you just gonna hang back and suck each other’s dicks?”

“I’ll suck yours for one of those rifles, man!”

Riki’s smile was not entirely unpleasant, when he recognized the mongrel who propositioned him. “Forget it Steve, I know where your mouth has been!”

That caused another chorus of chuckles, but more mongrels stepped forward.

“Understand this,” Riki said as he looked carefully at each man before deciding if he would give them a weapon; many of them he knew, others he could read fairly easily. He avoided the ones who he knew or suspected would be troublemakers and would not keep their word. “This is a deal,

every one of you who agree, who gets a rifle, who shows up at Midas or Tanagura, you've made a deal with me." His eyes narrowed dangerously. "If you know who I am, you know what I do to guys who break deals with me."

Several mongrels immediately nodded, most of them knew better than to cross Riki the Dark, no matter where he had been or what he had been doing. He was here now, and not a single mongrel doubted that the young man would own up to his reputation; especially after what they had seen Riki do to Dawes.

"These are latch cards," Riki stated as Guy handed him a box of thin silver square discs. "If you swipe them at the entrances to the city, it will let you in and will count you as zero."

"Sweet," Maples, a short, thin mongrel commented as he accepted one of the discs, then the box Riki gave him so he could help hand out the rest, while Guy did the same with a second box. "We get to keep these?"

"Sure." Again, Riki felt a tinge of guilt at withholding information.

Katze had advised that the latch cards were time sensitive, and would be useless after three a.m. Riki understood the purpose of such precautions, just like with the rifles, certain things could not be left indefinitely in the hands of mongrels, but he felt a flare of the old resentment surge through him.

Iason was his master, his mate, but before the Blondie had taken him his home had been Ceres, his friends and his life had been in this hell hole, with these people. There were some mongrels he had trusted and some he didn't, but when it came down to them or the Elites, Riki would always chose those of his kind. What he was doing was a betrayal and it kicked at his pride and his sense of honour.

It troubled him that Elites were asking mongrels to risk injury and possible death, while still maintaining that element of control over them. Technically, it shouldn't matter to those in the slums that Jupiter wanted to kill off Her own creations. Logically, it might even be better for the

mongrels if there weren't any Blondies any more. If he was still Riki the Dark, that would be exactly how he would feel. Let them fight amongst themselves, what was one less Blondie, one less Elite?

But too much had happened, too much had changed for Riki and now he had a vested interest in the fate of the Blondies, or at least, one particular Blondie. He was betraying those he had grown up with, those in his past, for someone who held his Future in the palm of his hand. If only he could go back to those days where he didn't care about anyone, or anything but himself. All he was left with was a kernel of hope that if they succeeded in their plans to end Jupiter, some of that reality for those living in Ceres would change.

"Riki?"

Riki glanced at Guy and realized that he had allowed himself to be distracted while handing a rifle to a waiting mongrel. "I'm fine," he returned in the same quiet voice.

Once the contraband was divvied up, Riki reminded them of the time and then climbed into the passenger seat of the car, while Guy slid into the back.

"You did very well, Riki," Iason stated as he pulled away.

"Just...don't talk to me for a while, okay?"

Iason scowled but nodded, and glanced in his mirror to see that Guy was also slumped in the back and looking particularly grumpy. The mongrels appeared to have accepted Riki's deal, so he couldn't fathom what had turned Riki and guy's moods so sour. However, he respected Riki's request and headed back to Dana Bahn.

Chapter 44

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul and Katze make plans.

Katze was memorizing the holographic schematic of Jupiter's tower, searching every possible route in and out. Everyone had been briefed on getting in and out of the power grids. Jupiter's grid would be easier as Raoul planned to use his device to remove the security field, so they could, theoretically get inside without having to use the ventilation constructs that Riki would be faced with at the main grid.

Guy and Shiao would be inside Jupiter's tower, hoping to distract the AI from what everyone else was planning to do, around the same time as the riots would break out in Midas and Tanagura, assuming that Riki had managed to talk the mongrels into the plan. The problem was that Jupiter's tower would immediately seal itself off at the first sign of a threat, and as the plan was to trap the AI in the tower and prevent Her from using the power lines to flee to another system, whoever was inside would be trapped as well and probably would not be treated kindly.

Katze didn't care about the mongrel and ancient Onyx Guy had been a pain in the ass since their original visit to Dana Bahn and the Shiao, well quite frankly the Onyx was rather fascinating, but he could also still be a threat to Iason, so again his destruction wouldn't be a great loss. However, Katze was a problem solver at his core and finding a way to get either or both of them out alive was a hell of a problem, so what did it hurt to try? Besides, he'd owed it to Iason not to put Riki through the death of another friend, if he could prevent it.

The datapad that held Cal's plans sat on an ancient table, surprisingly clean thanks to Peter who had made it his mission to do what he could to make the ruins reasonably clean and sanitary for his Master. The kid had polished every available surface, had arranged makeshift beds with the blankets from the ship's transported supplies and had even managed to remove a good

chunk of the lingering dirt and rubble in the rooms their team was utilizing. He suspected that Shiao and Guy had helped with that. Even now, he caught the scent of food that the efficient Furniture was cooking in another room. Where he got the power to do it Katze had no idea.

“Katze?”

He glanced at Raoul, then turned back to the hologram. “You were right. I don’t see a way out of Jupiter’s Tower once everything goes into lockdown. How is that possible? There has to be a way right? What’s the point of getting locked in if you can’t get out? What if you’re locked in with the zombies, then what would have been the point of locking down in the first place?”

“Zombies?” Raoul asked, intrigued by the reference.

Katze shrugged, smirked. “Sorry, old Earth reference. It refers to someone who died and came back to life.”

“So, am I a zombie then?”

“Depends?” Katze glanced at him. “Do you have a craving for brains?”

“I enjoy intelligence, yes.”

“Not that way, brains, as in you want to eat them.”

“Eat someone’s brain?” Raoul found he was both appalled at the idea and intrigued.

The brain was the core of a humanoid’s being; all its knowledge and experience, its sense of reasoning and its sense of doubt. Would ingesting the brain matter of another give you their personality, their memories? Would any part of that person become part of you? It was a captivating theory.

Katze, who had paused in his task to watch Raoul’s expression scowled. “If you start eating brains you are on your own.”

“It’s an interesting...”

“No, Raoul. Just ...no.” He suppressed a shiver even as a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he turned back to the plans on the table. It was hard to tell when Raoul was kidding and just being...well, Raoul. “All I was saying was that it doesn’t seem very logical to design a place with no actual escape.”

“Jupiter does not have a physical body to transport She can travel through the wires and main circuitry to anywhere outside the tower.” He glanced at the small mat and blankets that had been put down on the cold stone floor, stepped closer, took Katze by the shoulders and turned him. “You should be sleeping.”

“I wanted to have another look first. I don’t like sending them in without a way out.”

“I didn’t know you were so close with them.”

“My feelings have nothing to do with it. There’s no reason why I can’t put some effort into keeping them alive.”

Raoul’s hand squeezed Katze’s shoulder. “You are a very good man, Katze.”

Katze snorted. “I’m about as far from good as you can get.”

“No, I don’t think so. You may deal in the black market, but your heart is pure.”

“God, don’t say stuff like that!” Katze turned back to the table.

“Does it embarrass you?”

“No, it’s just weird.”

Katze?”

“Hmmmm?”

Raoul slid his hands around Katze’s waist. “Do you have regrets about what we did?”

“I don’t believe in regrets, Raoul.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“But I am not having sex with you right now, either.”

That got a chuckle out of the Blondie. “Actually, I was going to ask for something else.”

Katze turned back to him. “Like what?”

“A promise.”

“What kind of promise?”

“Well, the situation tomorrow will go one of three ways. We succeed in destroying Jupiter and survive to pick up the pieces.”

“I like that one.”

“Or, we fail and are left to suffer Her judgment, which may also mean death for us.”

“Not the one I would prefer.”

“Or we succeed in destroying Jupiter but...” Raoul pushed a lock of wavy red hair away from Katze’s forehead. “We die in the attempt.”

“Well, aren’t you a barrel of positive energy?”

“Katze.”

“Raoul.”

“I want you to promise me that if it is the first option, you will be mine.”

Katze stiffened pulled away. What did Raoul mean by such a comment? “I belong to...”

Raoul caught his chin in a hard grip. “I am not speaking of Masters and Furniture, I speak of...”

“Of?” Katze prompted when Raoul paused.

Raoul studied Katze for a long moment, then said. “Love.”

Katze wrenched away, angrily. “What kind of game are you playing at?”

“Game?” Raoul asked carefully.

“You can go fuck yourself!” Katze tossed and would have stormed from the room but Raoul grabbed his arm in an iron grip.

He was accustomed to Katze’s hardened exterior, his gruff, bordering on rude comments, but that was simply the man’s natural defense mechanism. He worked in an environment where trust was a commodity, to be bought and sold, or used as a tool for advancement or failure. Raoul rarely took any of Katze’s biting remarks seriously, although there were few who would dare to speak to a Blondie in such a way.

Raoul also prided himself on having a high tolerance level for the foolishness of others, he was not easily annoyed and what often annoyed other Blondies merely intrigued or amused him. Even with Riki, the true bane of his existence, he overplayed his annoyance to get a better reaction from the mongrel, or more often, Iason.

Winding Riki up was one of his favorite pastimes, just as he enjoyed testing the loyalty or irritability of his brothers. He found it immensely satisfying to discover the boiling point in every one and come to just the edge of it without allowing it to overflow. Perhaps that was why he and Gideon got on so well, Gideon had been a great instigator as well.

Katze's boiling point had been higher than he had anticipated, but then Katze had been trained as Furniture so it should be a challenge to get under his skin. Once Raoul had managed that incredible feat he was thrilled with Katze's reactions and found the young man a constant source of surprise and amusement. He could admit that he had initially baited Katze as an experiment, but over time it had become so much more.

"Explain what you mean by that," Raoul demanded after unsuccessfully trying to calm himself. This time Katze had gotten under his skin, and that was nearly impossible.

"You know what fuck you means!"

"The other thing you said."

"I belong to Iason..."

"I am well aware of who you belong to!" Raoul snapped, grabbed Katze by the shoulders and gave him a hard shake. "What did you mean by playing a game?"

Katze was surprised by the physical approach, and by the tone in Raoul's voice. It was not the calm, amused voice he was used to. This was the voice of authority, of righteousness. This was the voice of a Blondie. He opened his mouth to reply just as Raoul spoke again.

"Think before you answer. Think carefully, Katze, for I will only tolerate so much even from you."

Katze swallowed, hard. "I didn't mean anything by it..." His teeth rattled as he was shaken again.

Raoul's eyes flickered to red for an instant and Katze flinched, then his eyes returned to their usual shade, but they were not the green Katze had become fond of. Where Iason's cold blue eyes often compared to frozen ice, the dark jade of Raoul's now seemed to be made of stone.

“Lie to me again,” Raoul warned. “Lie to me again and learn just how forgiving I have been until now.”

“Raoul, I...” It was the first time, Katze realized, that he had seen the Blondie truly angry with him, and it wasn’t just anger he saw in Raoul’s face, but something intimately primal. “It’s all going to end soon, so what does it matter?”

“It matters to me. It matters that you still doubt my sincerity, that you still believe this is all a game to me.”

“Isn’t it? I mean, isn’t this all just another one of your experiments? It makes no sense otherwise. You have your pets back now, so there’s no logical reason to...”

“What do they have to do with any of this? What logic is it you speak of?”

“You’re a Blondie. You’re Raoul Am, the most logical, the most intellectual and scientific of Jupiter’s creations!”

“How dare you!” Raoul suddenly released him, stepped back to pace twice in an attempt to get his temper under control, before he faced Katze again. “I have been accused of many things, suffered many insults from insignificant creatures, unworthy of my time, but I would not have believed you would think such things of me.”

“What things?” Katze demanded, confused, wishing his heart would settle down and stop trying to break through his rib cage. What was going on? Why was every word he was saying coming out wrong and why were they upsetting Raoul?

“I am a Blondie, therefore I am incapable of emotional thoughts and actions?”

“What? No, I never said...”

“You see me only as a machine? A higher life form, yes, but outside the scope of passion, envy, lust?” Raoul thought of Jupiter’s charges against

him and grew more furious. “I *am* superior to you. I *am* logical and brilliant; therefore, I cannot possibly want you for any reason other than to further my experiments?”

“Raoul, I...I didn’t mean...”

“I *choose* you, Katze, not for an experiment or some inane wish for physical release before everything goes to hell. I choose you because I am damn well in love with you!”

Katze staggered back as if Raoul had physically slapped him. He hit the wall and slid down it like a marionette with his strings suddenly cut. “You...can’t be.”

“Am I also not capable of feeling love in your eyes?” Raoul snarled. “You continue to insult me and I will not have it! I am Raoul Am. I can do anything I choose, be anything I choose and feel anything I *choose*!”

Katze could only sit and stare as the Blondie paced the small, dimly lit room.

“How dare you criticize me or tell me how I should feel. I believed that your snide remarks and protests were no more than shyness and nerves, yet you truly believe these things? You’re nothing but Furniture turned second-rate gangster, a bought and paid for one I might add, and you have no right to judge a Blondie!”

Katze couldn’t move as Raoul continued to rant. He had never seen the elite like this, he had never seen any Elite like this. Was Raoul really angry or was something affecting him, like the other Blondies that Raoul and Iason had mentioned. And why couldn’t be move? Why was it so hard to speak or even breathe?

Raoul finally noticed Katze’s stillness and stopped to study the man. “What are you doing? Get off the floor for pity’s sake? Why...” His keen eyes took in the pallor of Katze’s cheeks, the uneven, halting breaths that pushed through the human’s mouth and he stepped closer. “What is it? Your ankle? Is it hurting you again?” Raoul reached into his jacket for the medication he

had taken from Katze's nightstand and crouched to offer him two of the pills, surprised when Katze flinched back. "Katze?"

"Don't touch me," Katze whispered as fear crept up his spine and spread through his entire body. He had witnessed Iason's anger, his cruelty, but it had never been directed at him, and now, with Raoul too, witnessing it against others had offered him a shield, but now he had no shield because now he was the target and for the first time in years, he was truly terrified.

This wasn't the Raoul he knew, and it hurt. It hurt to know that everything Raoul had said was true. He was nothing but a trained gangster. He had insulted a Blondie in unforgivable ways, had allowed himself to believe he was on the same level, the same wave length as a child of Jupiter. What the hell was wrong with him? How could he have allowed things to go so far? He knew better, damn it he knew better than to act like this! Iason would be so ashamed of him, so angry at his behavior.

"Katze." Raoul realized that he had lost his temper, but would not apologize for it. What Katze had said had angered him far more than it should, and he was puzzled by his own reaction to it. He'd have to analyze it later, right now Katze looked as if he were in pain so he needed to deal with that first. "Let me help you."

"No!" Katze slapped the Blondie's hand away. He was afraid, so much more afraid than he had been when Raoul had wanted to fuck him and he didn't fully understand why. Raoul's words frightened him, the Blondie's *confession* had horrified him.

Sensing Katze was close to an edge that might cause him to regress, Raoul approached him like he would an injured animal. "Now Katze, it is natural to argue, some even find it stimulating. I understand that it is part of any relationship and..."

"We don't have a relationship!" Terror, hot, white terror lanced through his heart and set it to pound so hard that he almost wept from the thrum of it in his ears.

"Of course we do."

“I’m Furniture, remember? Just Furniture! Just gangster trash!”

“I never called you trash, Katze and I don’t care that you used to be Furniture.”

“Then why say it?”

“Why?” Raoul considered. “Because you made me angry.” Because he’d hurt him, Raoul realized. The reality of Katze’s doubt in him had wounded him in a deep place he had not known existed, and so he had retaliated and wanted to hurt back.

“Why?” Katze demanded almost desperately. “What did I say to make you so angry?” He wanted to cry. He could feel the discomfort, the edgy feeling winding up his chest and into his throat, but his eyes remained stubbornly dry.

He needed to understand how he had caused this, because he never wanted to see such a side of Raoul ever again. He never wanted Raoul to look at him like he was an insect, never wanted to regret and fear that the Blondie would become angry enough to become indifferent to him, to hate him.

“What did I say that was so wrong?”

“Katze.” Raoul felt temper push at him again and willed it back, then deliberately softened his voice. “You doubt me. You doubt how I feel about you.”

“*Feel* for me? Sex, we just had sex and it’s just a physical response! You said it yourself...”

“What we did was more than sex, Katze.”

“No! It wasn’t. It can’t be.”

“Why can’t it be, and do not dare say it is because I am a Blondie and you are Furniture. One has little to do with the other.”

Katze searched for an easy lie or a quick retort, anything, but the truth was all he found. “I don’t know how.”

His voice was so shamefully soft that even with Raoul’s enhanced hearing, the Blondie had almost missed it. Scowling, he settled cross-legged on the floor, recently cleaned by Peter, and reached for Katze’s trembling hand. “You don’t know how to what, Katze? What is it that you are so afraid of?”

“You. I’m afraid of you.”

“Whatever for? I have never been rough or unkind to you...”

“That’s why,” Katze whispered. “That’s why you scare me. You don’t treat me...you treat me different than others do. You...” He tried to organize his thoughts but it was useless, there was too much in his head, too much in his heart and he didn’t know how to say what he needed to say without sounding like a fool. “You...said you loved me.”

“I do.”

“That’s why. That’s...it.” Damn, why couldn’t he say what he meant? Why couldn’t he find his courage, his pride, his voice? “Love. I don’t know how to feel it, to give it. I...” He didn’t know how to control it was the problem. All these new feelings that threatened to overwhelm him, constantly making him say things, do things he would never normally do. “It’s driving me crazy. I can’t think straight, can’t...”

“Katze,” Raoul sighed and caressed the man’s cheek.

Katze rubbed at his chest with his free hand. “It hurts. It hurts here, all the time, like someone is sitting on my chest and it gets hard to breathe and I can’t think or say what I mean to say. It all comes out wrong, it all sounds right in my head but it comes out wrong when I say it and it pisses me off, and then I say things I don’t really mean but you don’t seem to care. You... you just accept my behavior, my words and never get mad until...until now. Until now, I was the only one getting mad and so I thought it was something wrong with me but then you got mad and I...I’m so, so sorry

because I don't like you mad. I don't ever want to make you mad because it scares me because..."

"Because?" Raoul promoted gently, and wondered if Katze even realized that everything he was saying was coming out fast and furious as one full sentence.

"Because..." Katz tried to avert his eyes but Raoul caught his chin and held his gaze. "Because then it'll be over?"

"What will be over?"

"You. Me. This thing going on between us, and part of me wants that, wants it to be over but then you got mad and it scared me because I..." Katze's voice got whisper soft as he closed his eyes. "Don't want it to be over."

"Yes." Raoul closed his own eyes as deep, joyous satisfaction spread over him. He hadn't realized how much he had needed Katze to return his feelings until that moment, although the black-market dealer still seemed confused as to what those feelings truly were. He opened his eyes, saw Katze staring at him. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"How can I tell you? I don't even understand any of it, so how can I explain it to you? I'm just Furniture that used to get fucked by his father and now cons people out of their merchandise. I'm no one, Raoul."

"You are not no one, Katze. You are much more than that, so much more and more importantly, you are no longer a child, no longer Furniture and no longer alone. Do you not think I have had some troublesome moments in all of this? That I have not spent far too much time trying to analyze and dissect what I feel for you? That I have not tried to forget it?"

"You...you have?"

"Of course. As you said, I am a brilliant and logical Blondie, and after all my theories, all my experiments and dissections I have drawn only one conclusion."

“What is it?”

“That neither of us have any control over this so we should just accept it and enjoy it.” Raoul’s thumb moved across Katze’s parted lips. “I thought you had.”

“I...I accepted the physical response, the sex and...” He paused, cautious of not angering Raoul again. “That it was a game and would eventually end.”

“But you don’t want it to end.”

Katze shifted uncomfortably and watched Raoul smile. “I...I never said...”

“I find your discomfort with the truth...endearing.”

“Oh shut up.” The moment the words were out he regretted them. “I’m sorry. Forgive me, I shouldn’t...”

Raoul captured Katze’s lips in a quick, but possessive kiss to end the apology. “Don’t do that.”

“D...do what?” Katze wet his lips. More, he thought, he wanted more but he was so afraid to ask for it. He wasn’t sure where he stood now, what he should say or how he should act. He didn’t want to anger Raoul again.

“Don’t check your words with me. Speak as you always do, it is what I find most charming about you.”

“It’s disrespectful...”

“Wonderfully so.”

Katze stared at him, confused. Hadn’t he just pissed Raoul off by insulting him and being rude? “You make my head hurt.”

Raoul laughed. “I simply mean you should relax and be yourself, that is who I prefer after all.”

“I don’t want you to get angry again.”

“Katze, I have explained that already and I am not in the habit of needing to repeat myself. I was not angered by your words but by the meaning behind them. We have resolved that issue so let’s not think about it anymore, all right?”

“But what you said is true, Raoul. You are a great Blondie of Tanagura and I...”

“*You* are just what I want you to be.” Raoul kissed him. “Can we not both be satisfied with that, and with the fact that you are mine now?”

Katze scowled. “You keep saying that but I belong...”

“To Iason, yes, but that is not the meaning I speak of.” Raoul slid his arms around Katze again, put his forehead to the human’s. “If you asked him, Iason would let you go, but what I am asking is not ownership, Katze. I want you to be mine.” He lifted his head to meet Katze’s confused, turbulent gaze. “Not as my pet. Not as my Furniture.”

“Then what?” Katze asked and was surprised by his own sudden breathlessness. What else was there, his hit man? His dealer? His whore? His fucking chef?

“Mine. Just mine, to stay by my side. To be with me. To share a life with me.”

“Share...” Katze’s eyes grew wide. “A...are you asking me to...to be your life mate?”

“Is that what it sounds like?” Raoul considered, then nodded. “Perhaps then that is what it is.”

“Raoul, this is crazy! Just because you got a taste for...”

“No. It is not a merely a taste or a whim, Katze. I have no attraction towards any other, as I do for you. I want no other as I want you. Aside from the physical there is...” Raoul shook his head, ruefully. “There you have it, as I said before, we are both suffering. I also cannot communicate properly what

I intend, that is something you do to me as often as you claim I do to you. You interrupt my thought process and make it difficult to find the words I desire.”

“I do that?”

“Yes. Yes, and it is not something I am pleased about, but I am willing to bear with it as long as you agree to be mine.”

Katze was stunned, he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He’d had no regrets and had, more or less, accepted that their relationship was irrevocably changed, but that was when he believed it was temporary, unrealistic- a game. He accepted that Raoul would want sex again, he couldn’t deny that he too, might also want it, but this...this went beyond mutual satisfaction and need.

“Now is not the time to be hesitant, Katze. We could die tomorrow and, in all honesty, I find myself less concerned with our triumph than I should be.”

“What are you saying? Do you want us to fail? To die?”

“No.” Raoul stepped back, turned to the schematic on the table. “Again, I have difficulty explaining myself.” He gathered his thoughts, then turned back to Katze. “I suppose I am looking for a reason, a reason to win, to survive, to triumph.”

“Isn’t destroying Jupiter enough, especially after what She did to you?” Katze asked. “Or saving Iason and your brothers?”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” Raoul shook his head, leaned against the table. “It appears not. It seems I am looking for something more than that.”

“And that something more is me?”

“Yes, I believe it is.”

“Raoul, I’m no fucking prize! How can you...” Katze broke off as Raoul caught his face between two large, Blondie hands.

“You are a prize to me. You are worthy to me, Katze. Worthy of me. Promise me. Promise me that should we succeed and survive you will be mine, willingly and without hesitation. That you will no longer doubt my feelings or your own.”

Katze couldn’t believe he was having this conversation. It was like something out of those trashy novels he read only so much sweeter. It touched him in a way he dared not ever hope he could be touched and as he stared into the jade eyes that had always, from the moment he first encountered the Blondie at the tender age of twelve, stirred him on some deep level he knew that he could not deny the Blondie.

“Okay,” he whispered and he was pulled into Raoul’s arms. “If we win, if we get Option one, I’ll be yours.”

“Thank you, Katze.”

“We’d better win, Raoul.”

Raoul chuckled and started backing Katze towards the wall.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“We are going to consummate our agreement.”

“You don’t consummate agree...Ooof!” Katze landed on the pallet harder than he would have liked, and had no chance to rise up before a very amorous Blondie was on top of him. “God, you’re heavy!”

“Sorry about that.” Raoul shifted, even as his hand slid up inside Katze’s tunic. “I’ll try not to crush you.”

“Gee, thanks so much.”

Raoul paused in his explorations and met Katze’s gaze, searching for a sign of his usual panic or fear. “Are you okay?”

“No, I told you, you’re heavy and the floor is like rock.”

“The floor is rock,” Raoul countered, but his face remained serious. “Do you think you will regress?”

Katze couldn’t say for sure. What he did know, was that the minute Raoul had walked into the room he’d become aroused and oddly enough, hadn’t been alarmed by it. He slid his hand between them, touched Raoul. “You’re hard.”

Raoul reciprocated. “As are you.”

“Guess we should do something about it.”

“You’re not going to resist?”

“What’s the point? You run faster than me. You’d only catch me and drag me back.”

“Ahha! So you have finally realized the truth of your predicament!” Raoul produced an evil laugh that had Katze chuckling, then suddenly Katze was pulled into a tighter embrace. “Will you really be mine if we win, Katze? Truly and freely without reservations?”

It was odd hearing hesitation and uncertainty from Raoul, so Katze pushed back so he could meet the Blondie’s searching eyes. He considered everything they had talked about, and how scared he had been at the idea that Raoul would be angry enough to walk away from him forever.

“Well shit,” he sighed as he made the hardest choice he’d ever been called on to make. “I *am* yours, Raoul. Even if we don’t win.” Katze watched a flood of emotion surge into the green eyes that bore into him and felt himself flush at the depth of it.

“I want you, but I do not wish you to regress, Katze.”

“Then be gentle, and maybe I won’t.”

“I can be gentle.” When Katze shot him a sour look Raoul grinned. “You can teach me to be gentle.”

“I think my work’s cut out for me.”

“Then let’s get started.” Raoul insisted and captured Katze’s mouth.

Chapter 45

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki and his team face a devastating discovery and are forced to make some hard choices.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone, I am so very sorry it was so long to update. I am recovering from surgery and have been unable to sit at a computer to write or upload for several weeks. I am on the road to recovery, but it is a slow one so please be patient with me. Please remember to review, and I apologize if there are any typos as I am heavily medicated. :-)

Riki stared out the passenger side window as they drove back to Dana Bahn. He hadn't spoken since he'd asked Iason not to talk to him almost an hour ago. The Blondie kept sliding him worried glances, but he just couldn't make himself break the silence.

He'd grown up a mongrel, although he knew now that he wasn't one. He'd lived as a one of them, and yet he so easily conned them into a dangerous situation that several might not make it out of. Despite what he'd told them, even with the devices and weapons, mongrels were no real threat to the security police. They were just going to be a distraction, and many of them wouldn't return or would suffer injury because of him. It was a betrayal that was necessary, and yet he found he just couldn't swallow it.

The desire to jump out of the moving vehicle and run back to Ceres, to warn them not to go and to be honest with what they were getting into was almost overwhelming, and that also bothered him. When had he become so soft? Why should it matter if a few mongrels died or were beaten or arrested? It had never particularly bothered him before. Life in the slums

left every man for himself, unless you were part of a gang. No one he spoke to today was part of his gang, his gang no longer existed. And still, he couldn't get this weight off his chest our out of his heart.

Come home to me, Riki.

Riki flinched and sat up straighter in his seat.

I will protect you.

Riki shook his head, opened his mouth to warn Iason, but nothing came out. *Get out of my head!* He screamed silently and was met with pain as Jupiter pushed further into his mind, into his memories and thoughts.

Desperate he slammed his head against the window. She couldn't be allowed to know their plan, and the only way to stop it is if he was unconscious, he'd learned this early on during his sessions with Jupiter when he had passed out from the first initial probes into his mind and She had been forced to wait until he woke up.

He slammed his head again, harder.

“Riki!”

The car stopped suddenly as Iason swerved to the corner and Guy leaned over the seat.

Out! Stay out! Knock me out! His voice wasn't working and neither Iason nor Guy could read his mind, so he lashed out and punched Iason. Knock me out, damn it. Knock me out!

“Riki!” Iason caught Riki's arms and held him still. “Stop this! Why are you...?”

So be it.

A piercing sound shrieked through Riki's head at Jupiter's last words and finally he had his voice back, but all he could do was scream.

“What is wrong? Riki, tell me what is wrong?”

Guy caught the terror, the desperation in Riki’s eyes, and thought of why his friend might have been hitting himself against the window. He suddenly jumped out of the car, ripped open the passenger door and wrenched Riki from Iason’s arms, the Blondie was too startled to keep hold of his beloved.

“How dare you!” Iason jumped out of the vehicle, rounded on them just as Guy punched Riki hard on the jaw. Iason’s growled as his pet immediately slumped against the mongrel.

“Wait!” Guy insisted as he held up one hand towards the enraged Blondie while trying to keep hold of Riki with his other arm. “Something was wrong! He was trying to knock himself out, didn’t you notice? That’s why he attacked you, he wanted someone to hit him!”

Iason grabbed Riki away from Guy and pulled him into his arms. “That is ridiculous! Why would...?” Realization dawned and he glanced down at his unconscious lover and thought of how Issac had screamed, before he had lost consciousness, how he himself had faced a mental assault. “Jupiter.”

“Jupiter?” Guy gaped at him then glanced around. “Where? How?”

“She was communicating with him telepathically.”

“He’s a mongrel! How is that even possible?”

“She has been in communication with him that way for some time.” Another aspect of the damn visits he had forced on Riki. Jupiter obviously suspected something and as She could not reach him or Raoul, She was trying another source. Damn, and Riki wasn’t the only source She could tap. “Get in the car!”

Guy did as he was told and watched as the Blondie carefully slide Riki back into the passenger seat and secure him before rounding to the driver’s side. The vehicle tore away from the side of the rode in a cloud of dust.

Raoul secured his tunic and slid his gloves onto his hands, then allowed his gaze to slide down to where Katze lay sprawled on the blankets. The redhead had only managed the energy to pull on his trousers, before he flopped back onto the bedding again.

The Blondie crouched, slid a finger across Katze's cheek and could admit that he too missed the scar that had once marred the pale skin. "Shall I dress you?"

"You've done enough," Katze muttered and turned on his side, away from Raoul. His body was still reeling from his last orgasm and while his flesh could still feel the weight of Raoul's hands on him, he had never felt so relaxed.

Raoul smirked. "Is that a complaint?"

"Would it matter?"

"Of course." Raoul leaned closer and whispered in Katze's ear. "It means I must try harder next time to please you."

"You've done enough," he said again but there was no sting in his words this time and his own lips twitched when Raoul chuckled.

Raoul gently pulled Katze towards him so the he could see his face again. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." The concern in Raoul's eyes was enough for Katze to give up any further pretense of annoyance and he twined several strands of Raoul's golden hair around his fingers, as it tickled his cheek. "You made me feel..." Katze searched for the words, unfamiliar with the surge of emotions that rose within him. When he couldn't find what he needed to convey those emotions, he tugged Raoul's hair so he could lightly kiss Raoul's lips. "No."

Raoul beamed at him, then dipped down for another kiss. “We could try for round two?”

“You mean round three? We already did it twice.”

“Did we? How industrious of us.”

Katze grinned before he could help himself, shoved Raoul away as he sat up, then winced as his head began to throb. He probably needed more sleep. “*We have work to do.*”

Raoul sighed dramatically, rose then offered Katze a hand up. “You are entirely too diligent.”

“And you’re entirely too spoiled.”

They stood facing each other and grinning, then Katze’s smile slowly faded as the pressure began at the back at his neck and seeped around both sides of his skull to the front. “Rao...” He began and that was the last conscious thought he had.

Peter heard the first scream as he hurried to the room where his Master had been sleeping, and as he rounded the corner into the entrance, he saw Raoul holding a bare-chested Katze by the arms while the man screamed as if he was being skinned alive.

“What is it?” he asked, horrified at the sight. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know!” Raoul shot back and shook Katze, then slapped him, anything to make the screaming stop. This was not regression, this was something else. “Katze! Katze stop!”

“Where is he?” Katze screamed in Raoul’s face. “Where is Iason?”

“Here!”

Both Raoul and Peter looked over as Iason charged into the room.

Katze turned towards Iason and smiled in a way that told everyone Katze was no longer there. “You would betray me? You would hide from me?”

“I am not hiding. I am here. I am right here.”

“I cannot feel you. I cannot reach you.”

Iason ripped the device out of his ear, even as Raoul cried in protest. “Here I am, Jupiter. Leave them be now, I will not hide from you any longer.”

Katze’s expression turned to one of near euphoria, then to one of rage. “You lie! I cannot reach you! Why do you lie to me?”

“The dampeners!” Iason looked over at Shiao as he rushed inside. “Turn them off.”

“No.” The Onyx replied coldly as he surveyed the scene. “She cannot be allowed to enter your mind, Jason.”

Iason turned on him. “I order you to do it!”

“I do not take orders from you.”

“Then he will die!”

Iason suddenly grabbed Katze away from Raoul and swiftly punched him.

“Iason!”

“Jupiter was inside his mind,” Iason stated as he carefully lowered the unconscious Katze back onto the blankets on the floor. “She cannot control a mind in an unconscious state.”

“How did this happen?” Raoul repeated, and looked from Katze to his brother, confused. “How...?”

“She has touched his mind once before, here in fact, at Dana Bahn, to alert him that Riki and I were not dead. She remained in communication with him for several months.”

“Then Riki?” Raoul began as he processed the news.

“Yes. Her connection with Riki was even deeper due to their sessions, and She attempted to access his mind on our way back.”

“How is that possible? Jupiter gains access through the chips in our head. How can She possibly access either of them so easily?”

Riki’s scream from the other room shocked all of them. Iason was the first one to move but when he arrived at the alcove where he had left Riki unconscious with Guy, he saw Yiela kneeling down next to his mate, his head cradled between her hands.

“What is she doing?” Iason moved to pull her away but a sparkling barrier suddenly threw him backwards, into Shiao just as the Onyx entered.

“I already tried that!” Guy snapped as he pulled himself off the floor, having experienced the same defence.

“What is happening?” Shiao demanded as Raoul stepped into the room with Katze in his arms and Peter at his side.

Yiela could not be bothered with the suddenly crowded room as all her energy was going into the shield around them and the mental tug of war she was having over her Prince’s mind.

Who are you? Jupiter demanded when She suddenly faced a sudden and powerful resistance inside a simple mongrel’s mind.

Yiela’s mind answered in kind. *Release him demon or I will destroy you.*

I do not know you. You do not matter. You will die. You will all die.

Not this day. Release him.

I am Jupiter. You cannot command me. I am supreme, you cannot deny me.

You are a valueless machine run amok with delusions of grandeur. You will release Riki or you will pay.

How will I pay. You are nothing. He is nothing. I am Jupiter. I am power and wisdom beyond your comprehension. Your threats mean nothing, and nor will your death.

Yiela cried out as her head snapped back on her neck, almost to the point of breaking as the spear of intrusion lanced through her mind, but her fingers never left Riki's temples.

Hear me Maku, accept me into your mind and we can defeat it.

Riki was in agony. He didn't want anyone or anything in his head, not Jupiter, not Yiela, not some dead lizard king pretending to be his father! Stop! He just wanted it to stop!

I can end the pain, Riki. Open your mind to me. Do it now!

Riki didn't know how to open his mind, he only knew how much it hurt to have two beings battling inside his fucking head! Make it stop! Make it stop!

“Yiela!” he cried on a broken sob as the pressure increased, like thousands of tiny metal shards slowly seeping into his brain. *Yes! Fuck! Do it. Do it!* But the moment he finished the thought the compression was amplified and his ability to think at all. His entire body bowed tortuously upward. No! Nonononononono!

Then, a sudden release, like the top coming off a bottle, and the pain was replaced by a dull throbbing.

It is done. The Jupiter AI is gone.

Yiela?

I am here, Maku.

In my head?

Yes.

Riki sighed as his body slowly relaxed. He opened his eyes to see tears streaming down Yielas face and remembered that when she healed someone she felt their pain. “F...fuck.” His body and mind were still reeling from the memory of such horrific pain. “Y...you okay?”

She nodded.

“Is it really out?”

“For now.” Yielas glanced at the others and quickly lowered her shield. “He is unharmed,” she stated, even as Guy and Iason rushed forward and crouched beside them.

“Riki!” Iason gathered his beloved to his chest.

“I’m okay,” Riki assured quietly though he was still shaking from the invasion and his head throbbing. “It...I’m sorry, Iason. I tried to block it out, tried not to show our plan. I...I don’t know if it worked.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Iason held him, just held him even as his fury grew.

Riki’s screams had terrified him, and then to be unable to go to him due to Yielas shield, it was too much. It was all too much. He needed to regain control of the situation and fast.

He helped Riki to his feet and Riki in turn held a hand out to Yielas to assist her, then pulled away from Iason to catch her as she swayed; Guy quickly found her an undamaged chair to sit on.

“We can delay no longer.” Iason stated as Carrie and the Dakfure joined them.

“We must begin, now.”

“We cannot!” Raoul insisted. “If Jupiter accessed their minds She would know our plans and we are doomed to fail.”

“Perhaps, but this has already begun. It cannot be stopped.”

“Woah, wait, hold up!” Carrie intervened. “Who accessed who’s mind now?”

“Jupiter tried to take over Riki and Katze’s minds,” Guy stated, angrily. “I didn’t think it was possible, but I just saw it happen.”

“That’s...” Carrie swallowed at the implication and put a hand to her head. “Jupiter can get into people’s minds? Jupiter’s telepathic?”

“It is more complicated than that,” Shiao advised. “All Elites are connected to Jupiter telepathically, due to a chip that was installed at our creation.” He turned to Iason. “I have suspected She had additional telepathic powers, but had not witnessed it until this moment.”

“I believe you are safe from such an intrusion, Carrie,” Raoul stated. “It seems Jupiter had communicated with Riki and Katze in the past in this way and that is how She does so now. She has never connected to you, so I do not believe you will be a target.”

“And the plan? Riki said something about Jupiter knowing our plan?”

“It is a possibility.” Raoul glanced down at where he had set Katze by the wall, saw the young man start to stir and went to him, crouched down. “Katze?”

Katze’s eyes opened slowly, dimmed with confusion. “What...happened?”

“Knock him out,” Iason ordered. “We cannot risk him being taken again.”

“Taken where?” Katze’s quick reflexes caught Raoul’s hand as it rose, but the Blondie only caressed his cheek. “What the hell is going on?”

“Jupiter took over your mind,” Raoul told him gently, searching Katze’s eyes for any sign that the AI’s presence remained. “You do not remember?”

“No.” Katze shifted and sat up straighter, then braced as Raoul helped him to his feet. “How would She...why would She do that?”

“She wants me,” Iason stated grimly. “So I will go to Her and end this.”

Riki gripped Iason’s arms. “The fuck you will!”

“Riki, She has resorted to mental attacks on Humans. I cannot permit...”

“You listen to me. You are not gonna sacrifice yourself to that technologically enhanced uber bitch!”

“Riki!”

“We’ve come too far, Iason. We have to go through with the plan now, exactly as we said we would. Anything else means She wins and She is not going to win. Do you get me?”

“She will amass the Onyx to protect Her,” Shiao stated, impressed by the mongrel’s speech.

Iason nodded. “The others Elites as well, perhaps even the Blondies if any are still within their own senses. Which is why I must...”

“Iason, we cannot go against our brothers!” Raoul glanced at Katze as frustration surged through him. He wanted this over, wanted the promise that Katze had given him, but he could not harm his own. “We cannot win this. We must surrender and ask for mercy...”

“No.”

Raoul glanced at Katze, surprised.

“We knew there was no going back when we started this, Raoul. We all knew that.” Katze slowly rose, favouring his injured foot and leaning on the Blondie who slid an arm around him. He met Raoul’s gaze. “We made a promise, didn’t we?”

Raoul’s expression softened for a flicker of moment, before hardening again. “Yes. Yes, we did.” If had not been in love with Katze before he had no further doubts that he was now.

“There will be no mercy,” Riki said. “We end this now, end Jupiter, as She would end us. as She planned to end all the Blondies.”

“But, Raoul’s right,” Guy said and ignored the surprised look that Raoul shot him. “Jupiter may have learned the entire plan already and a few distractions aren’t gonna be enough now. It was one thing to go against the Security police, but Elites and Blondies? No one can do that!”

“We can do it!” Riki insisted. “We just need to make a few adjustments.”

“Riki, if Jupiter is aware of our plan...”

“Then She’ll expect us to give up! She’ll expect us to surrender. She sees us as weak, as everyone else weak, but especially mongrels. The last thing She would expect is for us to follow through.” Riki glanced at Yielia again, relieved to see that some colour had returned to her face. “We just need a way to deal with whatever defences She throws at us.”

“We are but three,” Raoul reasoned. “We can handle a few of our kind, but not many, certainly not all, which I expect is what Jupiter will deploy.”

“M...Master?”

The others looked down at the Furniture in the room, who had been forgotten until now, and Peter held up the comlink in his hand, which had continued to sound every few minutes.

“I was bringing this to you, it...it seems urgent.”

“That is mine,” Shiao stated as he took the comm, he had not expected Re to contact him so soon. He opened the channel. “This is Shiao.”

“Shiao. I have managed to elude Jupiter’s search and Her other ships and it appears they are being called back to the planet. I can send a shuttle for you if you require.”

“No. Not yet, we have work to do still.”

“As you wish. There is something else.”

“Speak,”

“I am picking up an urgent communication from another vessel in the vicinity. It is not of Amoï, but they keep asking for the pet of Lord Mink.”

Shiao glanced at Riki who simply shrugged.

“Don’t look at me, I don’t fucking know anyone in outer...” Riki started as a voice sounded in his head.

It must be the Queen. I have missed our weekly communication updates.

“What the fuck?” He turned to glare at Yielia. “Why are you...?”

We are connected now, Maku.

“Well disconnect damn it!”

I cannot. There is no retraction once the connection is made.

“You didn’t fucking tell me that! This is permanent?”

“What is permanent?” Iason demanded suspiciously, as he was hearing only Riki’s side of the conversation.

“There was no time to tell you,” Yielia responded verbally. “There may be someone on Avalon able to break the connection, however...”

“Oh for fucks sake!” Riki didn’t want to have Yielia in his head! Granted she was a better option than Jupiter but, still!

“I had to do it, Riki. I could not break the AI’s link with you otherwise.” Yielia bowed her head. “I am sorry.”

Guilt speared through him at her downcast look and he remembered the pain he would still be in without her. “Shit it... It...It’s fine just...just try not to...you know?” He wagged his fingers around his head and thought he almost caught her lips twitching.

“I will endeavor to...” She mimicked his gesture. “As little as possible.”

“Riki?” Shiao handed him the link. “Do you wish to respond if it is your Queen?”

Riki stared at the comm as an idea formed in his head. He looked at Yielia again, then took it. “Uh...Re?”

“This is Re.” The red-skinned alien smiled at him. “Hello Riki.”

“Can you link me to that other transmission?”

“I will try. Give me one moment. Yes. Here we go.”

A moment later, the Queen’s beautiful face filled the small screen and Riki’s heart started to squeeze tightly in his chest in a kind of recognition he hadn’t felt before. Was this feeling because of what had happened at the beach house? If it was then he understood fully now, that she was indeed his mother. That connection, their connection was there in his heart and he felt it more strongly than he had ever felt anything in his life.

“Riki? Are you well? I was concerned as we had not heard from you.”

Was she disappointed in him, he wondered? Had she missed him when he had been taken as a child? He...Had he missed her? Was that what this weird squeezing of his chest was, this momentary flutter of...what? Happiness? Joy? Love? Fuck, he didn’t have time for this now.

“Yeah, well...” Riki scratched his ear in discomfort and tried to ignore the feelings she was causing to surface inside of him. “We’re kind of in a situation here.”

The Queen watched as Iason Mink’s scowling expression appeared behind her son. “I would speak with you in private.”

Riki glanced at everyone around him watching, listening. “Hang on.” He looked at Iason. “I’m gonna take this privately, okay?”

“No.”

“Just for a few minutes, I promise.”

“I will not repeat myself, Riki.”

“I won’t either,” Riki retorted, then heaved a heavy sigh. “I have an idea, let me deal with this, okay?”

“Alone?”

“Just for a few minutes.” Iason crossed his arms over his chest and continued to scowl but as there were no further protests he accepted the Blondie’s silence for ascent and left the room. It still wouldn’t be private since Yielo was still in his freaking head!

How many times must I apologize?

Riki shook his head as he walked down a ways to a room that was partially caved in on the far side. *Until you’re not in my head anymore!* He thought, as he turned his attention back to the Queen. “Okay, so, I’m alone,” More or less. “Listen, are you really in orbit?”

“No, however we are close enough that we could be within the hour. What sort of situation are you in? Do you require assistance? I can...”

“No, wait, just wait.”

Riki tried to organize his thoughts, his plans. He hated asking for help, especially from her, a woman he barely remembered and had constantly pushed away until this point. But he would have to swallow his pride and do just that. Things had gone from bad to worse and everything they had been dreading would come to pass if he didn’t do something to prevent it. Jupiter was not going to take Iason away from him. No fucking way.

“We need your help.”

“We? If you are in danger...?”

“I’m not, at this very moment, but I could be. We all could be. I’m asking for your help. Will you?”

Celestia gave nothing away in her expression as she regarded him silently from the other side of the comm. Finally, she spoke. “Perhaps. For a price.”

Riki swore, he knew it, he fucking knew it and he had no doubts of what price she intended to ask and yet, again he felt that odd fluttering in his heart. He pushed it down. “What happened to doing things just out of love and shit?”

“As your mother, I would give you everything I am able, because I love you. As Queen I must consider the consequences and weigh how my actions may affect my people.”

Riki couldn’t argue with that logic, but he didn’t have to like it. Still, he couldn’t help but allow a bite of resentment through. “Convenient.”

“What of the AI Jupiter? It appeared fond of you, will it not help?”

“Jupiter is the problem.”

“I see.” Celestia raised an eyebrow. “Riki, Avalon is your home. We are your people and would be happy to welcome you back with us.”

“It’s not about that.”

“It is precisely about that. Jupiter’s power was impressive when last we met. Are you in direct danger from it due to your proximity and connection to the Blondie?”

“What difference does it make?”

“The difference is that you are asking us to go to war against a being we have no prior conflict with and know very little about. A being with immense power, skill and influence. Strategically it is not a good option.”

“I’m not asking you to fight the war, just supply it,” Riki snapped. “All we need is your tech.”

“Our tech?”

“Technology. The weapons you used on Iason. We need something that works on that principle but can cover a wider field.”

“I do not believe it will be a match for such an entity.”

“No, but it can put down an Elite and we may need to do that to get to Jupiter.”

“Have you parted with the Blondie then?” Celestia asked. “Are you starting a revolution?”

“What? No!” But wasn’t that exactly what they were doing? Rebelling against Jupiter, going rogue? “Look, it’s complicated, okay, and I don’t have time to...” He ran a hand through his hair. “Cal’s dead.”

“Cal?”

“He was my...” Riki’s words caught in his throat. He couldn’t say Furniture because Cal was much more than that. Besides, the Queen wouldn’t understand the term. “Friend. He was my friend and it’s Jupiter’s fault that he’s dead.”

“This is a vendetta then?”

“Oh, fuck you! It’s more than that, okay? It’s more than you can understand because you live on a nice planet where there’s no poverty and no pain and plenty of food and...” He took a deep breath and tried to regain his temper. This was their only shot, and he knew it. They needed help, he needed her help and he would ask for it because his mission was to bring Jupiter down, and he would do just that. “I’m not asking you to sacrifice any of your people, or even get involved. If you can just lend send me the details on those weapons, we can make something that will work for us.”

“Giving you the technology you ask for would make us just as culpable in your revolution if it results in an act of violence against the people of Amoï, that includes the Elites that Jupiter created. It could still lead to a war between our two planets, Riki.”

Riki could feel his anger and frustration threatening to explode, even as his expression closed off all emotion. “Fine. Go back you your perfect planet and live your perfect lives and leave me alone. So much for fucking motherhood.”

The finality of his words frightened Celestia, though much like her son, her face gave nothing away. “I did not say we would not help you, Riki. I wish only that you understand how our assistance will have consequences that I, as Queen, must carefully consider. As I explained, your mother would deny you nothing. The Queen of Avalon must do what is best for her people and conflict such as this should always be avoided.”

“Hey, no problem. You’ve made your choice and I’m used to doing things on my own anyway.” Riki should have ended the transmission there, but found he couldn’t.

Riddled with anger and disappointment he refused to admit that her refusal had hurt him on a basic level. At what point had he come to think of her as a mother? At what point had he given her his trust and that small, sacred part of his heart? Now, here she was, abandoning him all over again, just like the first time.

“Riki?”

He forced himself to meet her gaze through the comm. “What?”

“As Queen, I must weigh the cost of my actions.” She paused, then continued. “As well as the reward.”

Riki’s gaze narrowed. “What do you want?”

“You *know* what I want, Riki,” she replied softly.

He sighed, yeah, he knew exactly what she wanted. “It’s a deal.”

Chapter 46

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki and Iason are starting to feel the strain of their situation.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone, sorry for the long wait, recovery is slow going. This next chapter was co-authored by Megha Shakya, who was paramount in its completion, so any kudos also belongs to her. Thank you for your patience, and please, please review I need the pick me up! :-)

Carrie paused as she unlocked her apartment door, tried to remember what state she had left it in, but then remembered the people waiting behind her and stepped inside. Iason, Riki, Yeila and Ran'talgis followed.

She scratched at her head and forced herself to be calm. While she had thrown out the idea of her apartment when everyone was debating about where will they be safe, she was now having second thoughts. She was, after all, just a vendor, and the simple two-bedroom dwelling that had served her purposes well enough now seemed severely lacking with a Blondie inside of it. As usual, she hid her nervousness behind sarcasm.

Iason noted that the apartment was very compact but serviceable. A rounded living area, which flowed into a corner kitchenette separated by a half wall to separate the two rooms. A short, squat hallway, which he assumed led to the bedrooms and washing area. While there was no artwork on the walls, they were painted a very soothing shade of rose.

The place was indeed small, the living area, such as it was, was only big enough for a small sofa and an ancient looking rocking chair next to a small round glass table that held a lamp with a coloured shade. Both faced the wall screen that had been set to waves crashing against a rocky beach as the tide rolled in.

There was no real clutter, aside from a sweater which was draped over the back of the rocker, and no nick knacks on the built-in wall shelves, except for a few books or samples of Carrie's wares. No personal photographs or *bric-a-brac* that showed a personal side. He imagined having been on the run so often that Carrie tended not to surround herself with material things that she might need to leave behind.

"I know it's not what you're used to," she said as she closed, locked the door and placed a bar brace over it. Riki was the only person who had ever been inside her apartment in the few short years she had been on Amoï. "It's...ah...really small, but there are two rooms, so Riki and Iason, you guys can have my room, there down the hall and to the left, and...um... well, the second bedroom is more of storage area but I can clean it up and put down some blankets." Had she made her bed? Cleaned the shower? She couldn't remember.

"Oh, and Yielia, you might be small enough to sleep on the sofa, if you prefer that. It's old, but comfortable. Ah...I can run to the market if there's anything specific you need and I will try my best to take care of yo..."

"Carrie." Iason put a hand on her shoulder, effectively silencing her. "Thank you for having us in your home, however you do not need to fuss, really. We are very grateful for your offer to stay here. Please, be at ease."

"I've just...I wasn't expecting company and you're my first visitors, really."

It dawned on her that in all the places she had lived, all the years she had been on the run she had never had visitors. Her fate, her paranoia had kept her separate and suspicious of others to the effect that she had always been alone. Now... She looked at Iason, at Riki and Yielia, lingered on Ran'talgis.

She wasn't alone anymore. She had friends, a family, possibly even her own people. How had things changed so drastically? How had all of this happened? There was the possibility of a future with people she loved, and yet, given their current circumstances with Jupiter, she could lose it all. Stupid, fucking toaster!

“You have done so much for us, Carrie,” Iason continued. “I feel fortunate to consider you as our friend and am very pleased to be among the first to visit your home, even if it is under such circumstances.”

Carrie’s cheeks burned, her eyes stung and she blinked away the tears before turning around and opening a panel by the door. She keyed in a series of codes.

Iason’s keen hearing picked up the gentle hum of an activated security shield and watched as the almost invisible shimmer of violet swept across the window next to him, before disappearing.

“Is that a Stunus 2000?” he asked and stepped up to the panel as she moved back. “This sector is not authorized for such security measures.”

“Arrest me,” she replied as she moved into the small living room and open concept kitchenet area. “I’m a hunted...” She paused and glanced at the other Dakfure in the room. “*Previously* extinct species, so I’m a little paranoid.”

“I was not reprimanding you,” Iason assured as he closed the panel, then watched Riki walk into the kitchen, as if he lived there, and open Carries cooler unit. “I was merely surprised as this is a very complicated system to install on your own.”

“I didn’t install it.” Carrie smirked at Riki who was humming as he pulled out container of cold pasta, grabbed a fork from the drawer and settled at the two-seater table to dig in.

“Riki,” Iason admonished as his lover cut himself a generous slice, set it on his plate then began to eat. “You are being rude.”

Riki glanced up with a mouthful of pasta, blinked. “I’m hungry!”

Carrie laughed and felt the stress and nervousness melt away. “I think we’re all hungry.” She opened her cooler and scowled, there wasn’t much in there as she did live alone. Closing it she turned back. “I can order some food?”

“That would be unwise,” Iason decided as he took the fork from Riki, twirled some of the cold pasta onto it and slid it into his mouth. Not bad, he decided, and handed the fork back to the mongrel. “We cannot allow anyone to see us here.”

“Right. Right, forgot, crazy homicidal toaster has spies everywhere.” Carrie glanced down at Riki who started to choke on his pasta as he muffled a laugh, she smacked him hard on the back, till he stopped coughing. “There’s a 24-hour market around the corner. It won’t run to the rich food you’re used to...”

“Carrie.” Iason almost sighed it and watched her lower her head as once again her cheeks flushed that delightful pink.

“Sorry. Sorry. I’m just...” She shook her head, raised her gaze to his and moved back to the panel. “I’ll just run out and pick up a few things then.”

“I will accompany you,” Ran’talgis offered pulling the cloak of his hood up to shield his face.

“There’s a surprise,” she muttered as she returned to the panel to remove the shield and turned to Iason. “I should only be about twenty minutes, if that. Reset it after we’re gone, the code is...”

“I know the code,” Riki said as he finished off his pasta, set the container and fork in the sink and grabbed a glass of water from the filter unit on the counter.

“Yes. Yes you do.”

“Here,” Iason said and handed her a credit stick. “Buy what you need with that.”

“If I use this they can trace your account.” She handed it back to him. “I’ll pay for what we need.” She caught a look from Riki behind Iason’s back and turned to Yielia. “Why don’t you come with us, too? The fresh air will probably help that headache I see lingering behind your eyes.”

Yiela glanced at her Prince, having also seen the subtle look pass between him and the woman. She did not want to leave him, but she would respect his choice. He obviously wanted some time alone with the Blondie. “You call this air fresh?” she said as Ran’talgis held the door open for both of them.

“Well, beggars and choosers and all that,” Carrie tossed and looked over her shoulder at the remaining men in her tiny apartment. “No fighting and no sex, you’ll traumatize the walls since they’ve never seen either.”

Iason chuckled as she closed the door, but the moment they were alone his smile faded and he turned on Riki. “What did you talk about on you call from Avalon?”

Riki knew this was coming, but still felt the chill run down his spine. He hadn’t reported his conversation with the Queen to the others before they left Dana Bahn, because he couldn’t know if Jupiter might launch another mental attack on any of them again. It was probably the wrong call, but he decided he needed to play things close to the vest from now on. The less everyone knew, the better their chances of defeating the AI.

He turned his back on the Blondie, poured himself another glass of water but did not drink it. “I asked if she could help us by providing us with the pulse weapons they threatened you with on Avalon.” He sipped slowly, cautiously. “I thought they would be the only chance we have if Jupiter sends the other Elites against us.”

“Help?” Iason repeated, quietly. Riki had been with him for years and had only ever asked something of him twice, yet he went to this alien creature who had kidnapped them, put Riki’s life at risk by their fake king after knowing them only a few months? “You asked that woman for help?”

Finally, Riki turned, leaned against the counter. “Do you not think we need help, Iason? Do you honestly think the handful of us can go up against Jupiter and her fucking Elites and live to tell about it?”

Iason chose, with great difficulty, not to remind Riki that he was also an Elite. “Riki, why? We have a plan. Everyone agreed it was a valid plan.

Why...?"

"Jupiter tried to fry my fucking brain! She knows the plan. She knows!" Riki screamed suddenly and threw the half empty glass across the room, watched it shatter against the wall. He gathered himself back in, lowered his voice. "We needed more, Iason. I got us more."

"And what?" Iason demanded as he stepped up and dropped firm hands onto Riki's shoulders, felt his lover tense. "Did you have to promise for the more?"

"I did what I had to do."

"Look at me." Iason caught Riki's chin, forced his gaze upwards. "Tell me Riki, what did you say? What kind of deal did you make?"

Riki had known he wouldn't be able to hide it, knew that Iason would be angry, but he was still hesitant to reveal the truth. He took a deep breath. "I agreed to go back and live on Avalon. I agreed to accept the role of Prince."

He held Iason's hard gaze with a boldness that reminded them both of what he had been through in his life and with the Blondie. That fierce, brazen courage that seemed imprinted in his DNA which allowed him to face the unfaceable. But it wasn't rage or anger that he saw in Iason's eyes, but pain, and that pain stabbed at his heart.

"You could not have done this." Iason whispered. "You should not have done this."

"Iason, listen, I..."

"You absolutely will not return to that woman on Avalon, Riki," Iason insisted. "You will remain here and..."

"I made a deal!" Riki snapped, his own pain, his own anger and frustration at being boxed into a corner by Jupiter and trapped by the Queen spewing out. "I had no choice after what happened. No choice at all. We needed help. I did what I had to do and we have a fucking deal now!"

“No, Riki...”

“Say no all you want, I made the deal!” Riki stabbed a finger into his own chest, angrily. He knew that Iason would be upset, had expected anger but to know he hurt Iason made him even more enraged at the situation; at every damn thing. “*Me*, not you. I did what I had to do. I made a deal and I don’t break my word!”

“You *will* break your word this time, because I forbid you to do this!”

Riki’s eyes narrowed. “Forbid? You can’t forbid...”

Iason grabbed Riki’s arm. “You are mine! I will not give you up. I will never give you up!”

Shit, he never expected things to go this far. Iason had seemed hurt now he was just livid. As much as he wanted to deny the Queen and stay with the Blondie, he couldn’t break a deal. It was all that he had left, all that remained of who he was, who he had made himself into. Even after becoming Iason’s pet, he managed to hold onto this one key element of himself and giving up on that was not possible.

“I... I can’t.” He turned his head to the side avoid meeting Iason’s eyes.

“Very well” Iason moved in and suddenly captured his lips.

“Iason! Sto- ahh...” Riki struggled to breathe as Iason ravaged his mouth.

Riki’s mind went blank for a moment, in sheer terror, as Iason suddenly spun him around and slammed him down over the kitchen table. He didn’t know what to do. Iason was mad, really mad, but along with that anger, he could still hear the hurt in Iason’s voice. Riki suddenly stopped struggling and closed his eyes.

“Are you going to punish me now?” he asked, hurt that it had come back to this. Despite everything they had been through together, it always seemed to come back to ownership and debasement for Iason.

“Oh no, my love,” Iason growled dangerously. “I am will show you what you will miss after you leave me for a foolish deal.”

Riki’s eyes widened as his jeans were ripped down to his ankles. “Stop! For fuck...Iason, stop!” Carrie and the others would be back any minute. “Iason!” he cried out in pain as Iason slammed into his ass and fisted his hands on the table until his knuckles turned white and tried to relax into the hard, dry fucking, but he was too damn pissed to relax.

“Tell me Riki, can you live without this? Can you live without me? Without my touch? Tell me. Tell me!” Iason shouted as he increased the speed and power of his thrusts without thought or concern for the one taking them. Riki could not leave him. He could not!

There was no gentleness from Iason, no attempt to make sure that Riki also enjoyed it and the mongrel knew he would have bruises from the ferocity of which Iason took him. Suddenly, almost as abruptly as it started, Iason pulled out and Riki slid to the floor.

“No.” Iason said and stared down at Riki who was still trembling from the attack and trying to pull his pants up over his ass, even as small drops of blood leaked from it. He looked at his cock which had not achieved orgasm and was, even now, withering back to its normal size. “No.”

Something in the Blondie’s tone had Riki turning and he saw Iason holding his head, a look of anguish on his face. It was a look Riki had never seen before, didn’t think Iason was capable of, and fear quickly replaced anger as he climbed unsteadily to his feet.

“Iason?” He took a step towards his mate and watched Iason step, no, stumble back. “Iason, what’s wrong?”

“I...I am infected?”

It came out as a question, as if Iason wasn’t sure of the answer and it scared Riki even more. “No. No, you’re not, you...” Riki watched Iason flinch away from him, again a reaction that was not attributed to an Elite. “Iason, calm down. It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean it.”

“I hurt you. I swore I would not do this again. I swore I would not steal your choice again.” Iason suddenly turned away, fastened his slacks and moved swiftly for the door. “I must leave. You are in danger if I stay and...” Iason felt the impact of Riki’s body hitting his, of arms sliding around him from behind.

“You’re not going anywhere. Iason, you were just angry, damn it, it’s okay!”

“I...hurt you. I am not myself. I should go.”

“You’d leave me? Fuck me and leave, me just like that?”

“You are leaving me!” Iason turned suddenly, confused by the strength of the unfamiliar emotions chorusing through him.

Was this fear? Was it sorrow? It was anger, he knew that, but the others emotions seemed to be threading through it leaving him in a pool of uncertainty. He had not meant to hurt Riki, had not meant to commit such an act, and yet he did, so the only reason could be that Jupiter’s madness had finally reached his mind.

Riki tried not to wince as Iason grabbed his shoulders, then reached out as the Blondie almost immediately released him again. “I don’t want to!” he barked back. “I have no choice.”

There was that damnable word again, Iason thought. Choice. Perhaps it was better though. If he was losing his mind, it was better that Riki be elsewhere. Perhaps it would be best of Riki went now, and was no longer involved in any of this and yet that thought pierced Iason with enough pain to almost fell him to his knees.

“Iason.” Riki caught Iason, alarmed when the Blondie started to buckle.
“Iason, come with me.”

Iason was having a difficult time understanding Riki’s words, even as the mongrel let him over to the two-seater sofa and settled him upon it.
“What?”

Riki crouched by Iason's knees, held back another wince as his ass protested, and gripped Iason's hands in his. "Come with me, to Avalon. I mean, we could be dead tomorrow, but if we're not, come with me."

Iason stared at him, trying to comprehend the words. "You... You wish me to accompany you, back to that place?"

"Yes. I know you'll probably hate it and you won't have the status there you do here...."

"I do not care of such things."

"Then come with me."

Riki realized, that despite the grim outlook of their situation, this was what he wanted. He didn't know how he would adjust to life on Avalon and was pissed he'd basically been blackmailed into it, but the more he thought of it the more he liked the idea of a new start. Away from Amoï, and the Elites. Away from the chains that this place held for him.

"I told you I wouldn't leave you again. I made my choice, but I'll understand if you don't want to come. I'll hate it, but I'll understand if you choose to stay here."

His mistake, Iason realized, was that in his anger, in his sudden grief, he assumed that Riki was running again. That the mongrel had finally found a way to escape from him. It was rare that Iason was at a loss for words. "I just...after I did that...How?"

Riki slid his arms around Iason's neck, leaned in. "I love you, Iason. The deal I made doesn't change that. Come with me." He kissed Iason's left cheek, then the right, then his nose and finally his lips. "We're mated, remember? I'm yours and you're mine. Come with me."

Iason slid a gloved finger down Riki's cheek. "I hurt you. I was so angry, Riki. I hurt you."

“Yes, but that’s over now.” Riki caught Iason’s hand, trapped it against his cheek. “Make it up to me. Be gentle with me.”

Iason stared into those dark, fathomless eyes that he adored and decided to do just that,

“Stop sniffing everything!” Carrie warned Ran’talgis as she wrenched a package of instant noodles away from him and set it back on the shelf.

“How do you survive eating food of this kind?” he murmured, amazed at all the clear coated packages or colourful boxes the store had on its few wall shelves and assorted racks. “It is not natural.”

“Natural foods need to be imported and it costs an arm and a leg, so usually only the wealthy can afford...” She broke off as she saw the aghast look on Ran’talgis face, as she was standing close enough to see beneath his hood. “What?”

“You must pay for food with your flesh? That is barbaric! Why do you choose to live in such a wretched place?”

It took Carrie a moment to realize what had shocked him and she almost laughed. “They...no, they don’t really.” She sighed, tossed a bag of crackers into the small basket he had insisted on holding. “You don’t actually pay with your arms and legs, it’s just a saying. It just means it is incredibly expensive.”

“On our planet food is plentiful. The air is crisp and pure and there is none of...” He gestured around. “This.”

“Yeah, well, good for you.” She opened a cooler and selected a bottle of wine, then a second. It wouldn’t be the quality Iason was used to, but...and she had to stop thinking like that. She set them in the basket. “You can go back to it any time you want.”

“Not without you.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“It is mine to waste.”

Carrie shook her head at him and then realized that she’d lost sight of Yielia. She turned back towards the first isle, then spotted the young alien woman outside of the store. “Stay here,” she ordered him and moved out the door. “Yeila? Are you okay?”

Yielia turned, her face was aflame with heat, her eyes almost glassy in appearance, until she lowered them from Carrie’s concerned gaze. “I...I felt Maku...I mean Riki was in pain and I had started back...” She twisted her hands together as she turned toward the street. “I was going to rush back, to help, only I could not recall which way we came and then...then...” She slapped her hands to her burning face. “His...his feelings changed.”

“Oh?” Carrie inquired, curious. She hadn’t realized that their connection evolved empathy, but then she understood the cause of Yielia’s plight. “Oh.”

“He loves the android.” Yielia turned to Carrie. “Maku truly loves that creature as his mate and I believe now that Iason feels the same.” She rubbed at her chest and tried to ignore the unfamiliar sensation that had pooled at the centre of her thighs. “I feel...relief that this is so. I understand now why they must be together.”

“Good. That’s good.” Carrie tossed an arm around Yielia’s shoulders and led her back into the store. Damn it, she told them no sex!

“Miss Carrie?”

“Hmmm?”

“I...I feel other things as well. Things that are foreign to me.” Yeila’s blush deepened, if that was possible and her eyes fluttered from the connection she was sharing with Riki. It was taking all of her will power to quiet her

mind and not disturb him, not remind him of that connection. “It is... uncomfortable.”

“Ah. Well, I can help you with that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” They walked down to the cramped freezer section as Ran’talgis followed, and Carrie grabbed a tub of triple fudge chocolate ice cream out of the cooler.

Yeila looked at the tub, confused. “How will this help?”

“Trust me. It helps.”

Yeila nodded and followed Carrie to the cashier.

Chapter 47

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze and Raoul have some quiet time before the battle.

Raoul glanced at Katze who remained seated on the examination table in his third lab location. As no one had looked there for them previously and Peter had successfully hidden himself and the pets there, it seemed the place to go after the fiasco at Dana Bahn.

It was Shiao who had decided they should split up and give Jupiter less of a chance of finding them all in one place again. Raoul had initially been against it, but as they only had a few hours left until their plans would begin, there was little point in arguing. All that had been set in motion would now either succeed or be a catastrophic failure.

He'd chosen the lab so that he could engineer what he hoped would be a barrier against Jupiter for Katze, although Katze had been sedated until about thirty minutes ago to prevent the AI making another attempt to infiltrate the black-market dealer's mind. They needed Katze for their plan, so he could not remain sedated; which meant it was up to Raoul to find a solution.

Katze had not said a word since he had woken, had only nodded in assent when Raoul explained the situation and accepted it without argument. That concerned the Blondie greatly. He'd already run several scans and could find no discernible damage to Katze's brain, and the sedative should not have any after effects, yet the man remained eerily silent.

"This should do it." Raoul smiled, walked over and showed Katze the small pea-sized transmitter with a curved tail that, he hoped, would block out Jupiter's interference. "Let's try it on you." He slid the end of the transmitter into Katze's right ear, then fitted the curved tail over the ear to remain snugly in place. "How does it feel?"

Katze nodded.

“Is it at all uncomfortable? I can add padding to the earbud if...?”

When Katze shook his head and Raoul began to worry that Jupiter had already taken over the young man again. He caught Katze’s chin, lifted it and stared into those beautiful, molten gold eyes. “Answer me, Katze. Speak, so that I know it is you.”

“It’s me, Raoul.”

Raoul nodded, relieved. “This *will* keep Jupiter out.” He hoped his words remained true but was startled when Katze suddenly slid his arms around him, laid his head on Raoul’s shoulder. “Tell me.”

“Just...”

Katze released a long, shuddering breath. Jupiter in his mind had been terrifying, agonizing. It was nothing like the brief moments when She had contacted him to rescue Iason or to check on the Blondie’s progress after Dana Bahn. This was so much worse and lasted so much longer.

He couldn’t keep Her out. Couldn’t stop Her from using him, or from saying horrible things to Iason. His mind had literally burned with Her in it and he had never felt such pain. Even the brutal assault and attack from those men had not made him feel so used and violated and scared.

“Can...can you just...Just hold me.”

Raoul’s arms tightened as his gloved fingers threaded through Katze’s hair. “I enjoy holding you.”

They remained that way for several minutes before Katze finally cleared his throat and pulled back. He lifted his hand to the new earpiece.

“Thank you.”

“Katze,” Raoul traced the man’s lips with the tip of his finger. “I know you are frightened.” The fact that he knew Katze to be the bravest Human he had ever encountered made this realization all the more difficult. “I will not allow Jupiter to hurt you again. I will make you this promise.”

Katze shook his head. “You can’t stop it, no one can.” His shoulders slumped. “None of this...I thought we had a chance, Raoul, a slim one, but a chance. Now...Jupiter is so powerful, more powerful than I...” He shuddered as he remembered how easily he had been stripped of control. How easily the AI had slid in and taken over his mind, his body. “How can we...?”

“Because we must. Because we are the only ones who can.”

“I made you a promise too.” Katze lifted his gaze finally to meet those deep green eyes, and caught Raoul’s hand in both of his. “I made you a promise, and I’m loyal to Iason so I’ll do whatever needs to be done, whatever I’m told to do, but...”

“Continue.”

“For the first time...” Katze took a deep, trembling breath. “For the first time since my father, since he did what he did to me, I want to run away. I want to break my word, ignore my duty and run far, far away and I hate that. I hate that I’ve become a coward.”

Raoul grasped Katze’s shoulders. “You are the farthest thing from a coward that there is, Katze.”

“But I...”

“No. What Jupiter did was heinous. To speak with an Elite is one thing, it has been so since the beginning and is something we are all accustomed to, but to attack the mind of a Human with such viciousness is unforgivable.”

“Why? Humans are nothing to Jupiter, we’re nothing to Elites. We don’t matter at all.”

Raoul caught Katze’s face between his hands as Katze again started to lower his eyes. “That has never been the case, at least not completely. If you were nothing you all would have been eliminated when Jupiter took over this planet. Something has changed in Jupiter, Katze. Something has changed in all of us.” He kissed Katze lightly on the lips. “Certainly,

something has changed in me. I cannot make up for the past, I can only tell you that you are worth so much to me, to many people. Please, do not ever see yourself as nothing, even as Furniture you were never, ever nothing.”

“I love you.”

Raoul’s eyes narrowed and his hands dropped limply away from. “Do not do that.”

Katze blinked, that had not been the response he had expected. “Do what?”

Raoul stepped back, moved over to fiddle with the tools on the lab counter. “We have had this discussion.”

“We have? What are you talking about?”

“I appreciate your consideration, truly. However, I prefer truth to lies. I have told you this.”

“You think I’m lying? About *this*? ”

“You said you could not love me, Katze.” Raoul turned slowly but kept his expression blank. “At Dana Bahn you claimed you were incapable of such feelings. Therefore, you were either lying then or you are lying now.”

“That was different! That...when I told you that you were supposed to agree, supposed to...” Katze fisted his hands and lowered his eyes in frustration and embarrassment.

Manipulation was part of his duty while working for Iason. He had developed an art for it at an early age and learning from Iason had only heightened that talent. In all the years since he had been working the black market, he had never been surprised or caught unawares by a person’s behavior, because most of the time he was able to predict or manipulate that behavior into a reaction he required. Even with Iason he could predict and anticipate what his master needed and, in some instances, what Katze wanted him to demand.

Raoul was a different matter altogether. He hadn't been able to predict Raoul or the situation that had befallen him. The Blondie threw him off his stride, messed up his thinking, his confidence in himself and his ability to deal with whatever came at him. Raoul was unpredictable and completely unable to be manipulated.

"What was I supposed to do, Katze?" Raoul demanded quietly.

Katze felt a sickness in his gut, felt it twist and turn enough that if he'd had anything in his stomach, he probably would have expelled it. What was the point, he thought? He'd admitted his feelings and Raoul didn't believe him because he had lied before. But he hadn't lied, not really. It had been a confession, of sorts, at Dana Bahn, but he couldn't go all the way with it because the idea of trusting someone with his heart, of truly relying on anyone was frightening. Still, they could be dead in a few hours and what the hell was the point of it all?

When Raoul stepped up, caught his chin in a firm grip and forced his gaze up, he knew there would be no way out of it and that pissed him off. "End it!" he snapped, furious to have put himself in this situation. It was all Raoul's fault! Everything was fine until Raoul started showing an interest in him. "You were supposed to walk away when you realized you couldn't have what you wanted!"

"That would be foolish, as I already had what I wanted."

"Had what...?" Katze ripped away from Raoul's grip and glared at him. "You don't *have* me, Raoul."

"Of course I do. You have been mine since I decided I wanted you. You confirmed this at Dana Bahn."

"And what, my feelings mean nothing?" What was he saying? What the hell was he saying? He had agreed to be Raoul's, he'd admitted that he was, so why was he trying to start a fight over it now? "Whether I can love you or not has no affect in you getting what you want?"

“Not really, no.” Raoul realized too late that he probably should have worded his answer a little more carefully. “We’ll discuss this later.” He turned away again, but Katze grabbed his wrist in a firm grip.

“We’ll discuss this now because there may not be a later!”

“Now, Katze...”

“None of it matters does it?” Pain. He felt that horrible pain in his chest again, the one he had described to Raoul less than 24 hours earlier. “What I’ve said? What we’ve done? What I’ve gone through to adjust to all of this?”

“Katze, of course it matters.” Raoul lifted his free hand to caress Katze’s cheek and scowled when the man released his wrist and slapped his hand away before making contact. “Katze...”

“How can it? How can any of it mean anything to you when you’re going to have your way no matter what? All that matters to you is getting what you want!”

Raoul felt a flutter of annoyance rise within him. “What do you expect? I am a Blondie, so of course I will get whatever I desire.”

“Oh fuck you and your psychopathic mind rapist!” Sonofabitch! Son. Of. A. Bitch! Was he really just an object to the Blondie? Just as he had been to his own father? Something to play with and fuck until he was bored, and then let others play? No. Np. What the hell was he saying, thinking? This was not where he had expected his confession to go!

Raoul struggled for calm. “The point,” he continued. “Is that my getting what I want does not detract from your right to feel or...”

“My right?” Katze muttered and tried to calm the raging ache that was forming in his head. “I suddenly have rights now?”

“Katze, I will forgive your belligerence because I understand that you are overwhelmed and feeling emotional, justifiably so, however...”

“Shut up, you stupid, motherfucker!” Katze grabbed Raoul’s tunic with both hands and jerked him forward. “I was fucking mind raped by Jupiter, so yeah, I’m feeling a little fucking emotional!”

“Katze...”

“I lied before! I lied because I was scared, scared of you and what was happening. Scared of me and what I was feeling, but...”

“You do not have to say anything else, Katze.”

“Why? Why can’t I say it, if it’s how I feel? You wanted me to be honest, to treat this as real and not a game and...” He slid his hands down and curled them around Raoul’s wrists and tried to reign in his emotions, tried to find some semblance of control, but there was none. “What’s the point of hiding it now? I’m not scared of you anymore because now...now I’m petrified. That’s *how* I feel. I’m terrified that our plan won’t work and everyone I care about, everyone I...I love, will die. That you will die, and Iason and Riki and...” He lifted his hands to Raoul’s face, felt them tremble. “I love *you*, Raoul. Right or wrong. Whether we have hours or days left, I want you to know that I love you and I think...I think I started loving you even back when I was still just Iason’s Furniture, but I didn’t, couldn’t understand what it was.”

Raoul’s felt an immediate softening of his emotions and a sense of, what he could only define as astonishment. He captured Katze’s hands in both of his. “Do you truly mean that? I have said that I can accept if you cannot love me, but...” Raoul realized that acceptance and need were indeed very different. Yes, he could easily keep Katze as his without Katze returning his feelings, and yet... “The truth now. I want, need the truth on this. I will not accept another lie.”

Katze swallowed hard, nodded. “I think...I think, maybe I always have.”

Now Raoul’s expression matched the wonderment he was feeling inside. “Katze,” he said in a near whisper.

“Even as a kid and working as Iason’s Furniture, I always got this weird tingle in my chest when you came over. I’d get excited whenever you looked at me or spoke to me. I told myself that it was just that you intimidated me, that I was actually scared of you but it was more, much more. All that shit with my father...I was so messed up, Raoul. I’d buried my emotions by then. Buried them deep as a way to deal with what happened to me, and I think that’s why my first master had me trained as Furniture. It was easy for me to work hard, to anticipate my master’s needs and still be unobtrusive without showing even a flicker of emotion.”

He thought of his father, of the men his father would sell him to. How he’d hated feeling their hands on him, pinching, probing, biting. Being penetrated orally and anally, often at the same time. As a child he’d been terrified, helpless and filled with despair and hated his life. As Furniture he’d been safe, secure and his life was filled with purpose. Iason had been the one to allow him to feel pride for the first time in his life. Perhaps that was why he was so loyal to Iason, why his position was so ingrained in him. Off-worlders were often judgmental about the dystopian lifestyle on Amoï. More than once he had been approached by people wanting to ‘help’ him escape. Escape had never been in his mind because being Furniture had saved his life, was his life. Working for Iason had allowed him to become a person instead of a thing. And then, because he was the brother and friend of Iason, Raoul started coming around more and more and the feelings Katze had buried, the pride, the professionalism and stoicism he had perfected started to crack.

“You screwed all that up.”

“I did? How?” Raoul asked, curious.

“You made me feel. Damn you.” Katze sighed, leaned his forehead into Raoul’s chest. “I started getting anxious whenever I knew you were coming by. I think...I think it started then, whatever this was, call it love or attraction or obsession. I was Furniture and I wasn’t supposed to feel any of that, but my secret, what I thought was my secret meant I had to work that much harder to pretend I couldn’t, didn’t feel any of that.”

“Oh Katze.”

Raoul considered how difficult it must have been for the young man, having never gone through the process to remove his reproductive organs and make him a eunuch, and having already experienced sex as a child, even in a traumatic way. His body must have been constantly at war with his mind as he tried to hide those natural and often uncontrollable reactions.

On any of his visits to Iason's, Katze, as a boy, had been polite and helpful, but yes, when he thought of it, distant. He'd barely looked twice at Katze then, Furniture was often expected to do things but dismissed out of hand generally by Elites, and he had been no different.

"I started putting up barriers when I realized what my feelings for you could be and I tried to keep my distance. I think I had started to love you, even back then, but it scared me because I couldn't love you. Aw, fuck! I don't even know why I'm telling you all this except that it doesn't seem as important to keep it from you anymore. It doesn't seem to matter as much as it did." Katze smacked at his head. "It's weird. Jupiter was in my head and it hurt like nothing else I can even imagine, but I feel clearer now. My mind seems clearer than I can ever remember it being. Does that make sense? It doesn't make sense. Fuck's sake I'm babbling. I must have a tumor. She put a fucking tumor in my head and now I can't stop talking and am making no sense."

Raoul started to laugh, then swallowed it because he could see that Katze was genuinely distressed. Instead, he curled his arms around Katze and held him tightly. "You do not have a tumor, I already checked."

"I'm sick. I must be sick then."

"Yes. We're both sick, completely and irrevocably." Raoul captured Katze's mouth in an exquisitely though kiss.

"I like that. I mean, you're really good at that. No, I mean...Shit what did that damn AI do to me?"

"You'll be fine." Raoul kissed him again. "Will you tell me again?"

“Tell you what?” Katze asked, and then when Raoul gave him a slow smile, he felt his cheeks heat. “I...I love you. I mean it, Raoul. I’m not lying. It has to be love, right? Nothing else could make someone so stupid?”

“Probably.” Raoul kissed him again. “I believe you, and as much as I would like to continue this delightful conversation, we have work to do.”

“Yes, right. Work.” Katze slid off the table, winced when he landed on his bad foot.

Raoul slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the small pill bottle, watched Katze frown, and then pulled out a small packet from his other pocket. “I suppose you want this one?”

“It works better.”

Raoul shook his head, but walked over and poured a glass of water, then dropped the powder into it. He returned to the table, handed it to Katze who quickly drank it.

“I’m not addicted.”

“Hmmmm.”

“I’m not!” Katze finished off the glass handed it back then scowled when Raoul remained almost pressed against him by the table. “You’re in the way.”

Raoul reached behind and patted Katze’s ass. “Allow me some fun.”

“Work, remember? We’re about to go running to our deaths.”

“So pessimistic,” he said just as Peter entered, his gaze solemn and in his hand, he held a mini-screen.

“It has started, sir,” the furniture stated quietly as he showed the chaos that was being broadcast from Midas by the local network.

Raoul took the pad, watched as mongrels attacked and were attacked by the security police. Witnessed rocks thrown through shop windows, fires springing up in several sections, police and mongrels brawling and shooting at each other.

“Yes,”

Raoul felt a pang of sympathy as those young vibrantly angry boys dropped one after another on screen against the better prepared police. Pity was an emotion foreign to most Blondies, him especially as he had experimented on a variety of subjects, animal and human. Feeling pity would have stunted his work and influenced the results he required, and so he remained objective and emotionless. The fact that he felt such a thing now, and for mongrels of all beings, was proof that he had been dramatically changed by this situation with Jupiter.

He handed the pad back to Peter. “They are doing their part, now it is time for us to do ours.”

Chapter 48

Summary for the Chapter:

Mission start, let's hope our heroes can keep it together and meet the deadline! Keep in mind that each separated section/scene of this chapter is essentially happening at the same time.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone for your patience. A Huge loving thanks to Megha Shakya for all her hard work and fabulous ideas which helped me to get re inspired after my recovery and get back into the swing. I hope to have the story finished by Christmas or at the latest new years, so I please bear with me and don't forget to comment.

Love Love. Hugs Hugs. Kiss Kiss. and Chocolate cake for those with a sweet tooth! :-)

Ani

“Something’s happened,” Riki decided as he glanced at his wrist unit.

They couldn’t use coms because Jupiter could monitor them, so everything had to be set and in place by a certain time. The Queen had not come through with the weapons as promised, the weapons had not been delivered at the place and time they had set, and now there was no way they would get passed the dozen Onyx surrounding the power grid building on the outskirts of Tanagura,

“What do we do?” Carrie asked quietly.

Riki looked at his watch again, hefted the laser rifle in his other hand. “We can’t wait. The others will be in place soon.” Or they wouldn’t.

He thought of Guy and Shiao who's mission put them in the very center of the danger at Jupiter's Tower. Would they get through? What about Raoul and Katze? Were they faced with this dilemma as well, with the grids so heavily guarded? They'd already had to tweak their plan because they were short one member.

He shook that thought away. That grief, that pain when he thought of Cal would do him no good here, he had to focus. This was the way it had to be and he'd fought with Iason over doing his part. He'd promised to succeed, he had to succeed. But fuck! How were they going to get passed the damn Onyx?

Carrie turned to Riki. "Give me one of those boomer."

"You mean the charges?" Peter inquired, thinking she meant the six small electrical devices he'd packed and reached into the small knapsack propped against the bolder. They would emit an electrical charge that would temporarily disable the grid, but he wasn't sure how they could be used against the Onyx."

"No, the boomer"

Riki stared at her blankly,

Carrie swatted him in the head and extended her hand again.

"For fuck sake!" he muttered and reached into the pocket of his leather jacket for the small homemade explosive. "How the hell did you know I had one?"

"Because you're not stupid and I can smell the Plastiton used to make them."

Riki dropped the device in her hand, watched Peter's eyes narrow in suspicion.

"Riki! Those are illegal!"

“No shit?” Riki glared at the Furniture and then felt a presence touch his mind.

Riki.

His blood ran cold, his heart rate increased at the thought of Jupiter gaining control of him again, but almost immediately he heard another achingly familiar and equally as firm voice respond.

No.

He closed his eyes, waited. Nothing. No pressure in his head, no further conversation. He reached out tentatively. ***Yiela. Was that you? Are you there?***

Always Maku,

A surprising relief filled him. He had completely forgotten that they were joined, had also dismissed his irritation at that fact, now he could only be grateful for it. Yiela would keep Jupiter out of his head so he could concentrate on his mission.

“Riki?”

He opened his eyes, saw Carrie staring at him with concern. “I’m fine. What are you thinking?”

Carrie decided not to push the matter and returned to the situation at hand. “I’m going to give our friends up there something else to look at and try to lessen their numbers.”

“They are Elites,” Peter reminded, sternly. “They have seen and done everything that can be imagined. They will not be easily distracted.”

Carrie pulled off her sweater. “They haven’t seen this.”

“No.” Riki grabbed her arm. “You are not doing this, Carrie. I mean it.”

“Riki, it will be fine.” She lay back on the ground and shifted out of her trousers, unable to stand up and risk detection even at this distance. “Elites are curious by nature, so when they see something they haven’t before, chances are they won’t shoot before getting a good look at it first.”

“And if they decide to shoot first and look you over after you’re dead?”

“There’s no profit if I’m dead.” She tried not to think about the hundreds of her tribe that had been slaughtered for their hides, or how she had wished for death when her ex-fiancé had sold her to those men. “There’s no fun in it if they can’t watch me suffer and squirm.” And scream and beg.

Riki touched her arm. “Carrie...”

“It doesn’t matter.” Carrie shook off the memories. “Do you have a better idea?”

“No, I...damn it, let me think a minute!”

“We don’t have a minute, Riki. We have to do this now or we’re all, to use your colorful vernacular, fucked.”

Riki knew she was right and yet he struggled with the idea of putting her in such direct danger. “I...What about that screaming thing you do? Wouldn’t that, you know, incapacitate them?”

“Maybe, maybe not. If it doesn’t we’ll have given ourselves away and then they’ll kill us all.”

Peter gasped as he watched Carrie change to her feline form. “O...oh my,” he said and started to reach for the soft looking fur on her arm, then jerked his hand back; appalled at his sudden lack of manners. “I...I beg your pardon. You’re a Dakfure, I’ve read about you!” Been obsessed by them, really, and for any meager piece of information he could find on them since he had been a child. Learning about ancient species was his one hobby, but he had never heard of a cross bred species of Dakfure, where they could appear Human. “I thought you were all extinct?”

“We’re making a comeback,” Carrie tossed and realized that he might be less shocked if he had seen under Ran’talgis’ cloak while they had been at Dana Bahn. “Watch for my signal then cover your ears.” She leaned in, rubbed her furry cheek against Riki’s smooth one.

Peter’s eyes widened as she leapt from her hiding place and started running at an incredible speed across the desert plains. “Oh Riki. Does Lord Mink know?”

“Know what?” Riki growled, furious that it had come to this, as he watched her slow as she grew closer to the grid area and the surrounding Onyx.

“That you are a Dakfure.”

Riki spun towards him. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Peter, surprised by Riki’s sudden ferocity, tried to scoot back on his knees, overbalanced and landed on his ass. “I...I only meant because she is your mother.”

“My *what*? ”

“What she did, brushing her cheek against yours, it’s a form of imprinting that many feline races do with their cubs, to ensure they have their mother’s scent and to keep away predators.”

Riki felt his cheeks heat, turned away from the curious Furniture and lifted his head just enough to watch Carrie slow, then lope leisurely on all fours towards the Onyx. Damn she’d covered the distance like it was nothing. He lifted the long-range goggles again and watched the scene. Sure enough, the low-level Elites were indeed perplexed as to what manner of creature was coming towards them. He felt his heart rate increase and pound painfully in his chest as several of the Onyx broke apart from their squad and slowly approached the tigress.

Once in the general vicinity of the grid building, Carrie stopped, as if startled, then took a few steps back, sniffed the air. One of the Onyx moved closer, held out a gloved hand and Carrie darted away from it. Another

actually set his weapon down, crouched and tried to entice her to come closer. She teased and tested them as if she truly were a wild animal, and then she let one of them catch a long stroke of her back, before darting away again. This caused more of the Onyx to leave their post to go and see the unique and fascinating pet.

“Incredible.”

Riki glanced at Peter who was using his own set of goggles to watch the scene unfold.

“It’s like a siren’s call.”

“Huh?” Riki asked as he turned his attention back to Carrie.

“Her movements, she’s mesmerizing them.”

“Really?”

“Don’t you think so?”

Riki stared through the viewer of his glasses as Carrie wound through the Children of Jupiter carefully, shying away from some, allowing a select few to touch her for a second before scurrying out of their reach. When she had all but five of the Onyx crowded around her, she turned her back to them, lifted her tail and smiled in Riki’s direction.

“Shit. Cover your ears!”

He dropped the glasses and followed his own advice as Carrie rolled the boomer into the center of her audience then darted away at top speed before they even realized she was gone. The blast echoed around them and caused the ground beneath them to tremble violently. Riki realized he was praying, even though he did not believe in a God and had never prayed in his life, he was silently pleading for whoever, whatever was listening that Carrie had made it clear of the blast.

When something wet touched his ear, his eyes flew open and he looked up to see Carrie perched on the top of the bolder looking down at him.

“Hi boys, come here often?” She straightened, from licking his ear, into an upright position.

Peter fairly goggled at her, looked out towards the grid that was at least a couple of kilometers away and now held a dark blackened circle with darker bricks spread around it. “How...?” he began flummoxed. “How did you...how did you get back here so fast?”

“I ran.”

“Burt...But it’s almost two kilometers!”

“I ran really fast,” Carrie smiled and was suddenly jerked off the rock as Riki grabbed her and wrapped his arms around her.

“*Don’t* do that again.” His voice was deep with emotion. Was it love, worry, or anger? Maybe all three. “*Don’t* you ever, ever fucking do that again.”

“Run fast?” Carrie slid her arms around him, squeezed.

He pulled back, glared and gave her a hard shake. “You know what I mean.”

“Oh that. I can’t do that again anyway because even they’re not stupid enough to fall for the same trick twice.”

“I...” He was enraged, Riki realized, and yet could feel laughter bubbling up inside of him. Relief? Probably. “How many did you get?” He lifted the goggles again, saw that what they had thought of as bricks surrounding the small blackened hole in the earth were actually pieces of Onyx and of the five remaining upright three of them were already hopping onto airbikes and headed their way. “They’re coming.”

Carrie, still juiced from her little ploy could hear the thudding of her own heart creating a primal rhythm throughout her entire body. Blood Lust, she realized. The Dakfure were essentially a very peaceful race, but centuries ago they had been warriors, beasts, and so they still had that ancestral yearning for violence. She had not felt it for decades, not since she was a

child and had decimated the hunters that had slaughtered her village. She knew she had to be careful and not lose herself to it and accidentally hurt Riki or Peter, so she pushed out some humor to keep her grounded.

She swiped the side of her nose with her thumb, a gesture she had seen in an old Earth vid more than once. “Okay, you take the right side I’ll take the left. We got this.”

Riki and Peter just stared at her as if she had already lost her mind.

“Oh, okay fine, you take the left, I’ll handle the right.”

“Fuck it.” Riki pushed his laser riffle up to full power, propped it on the bolder and steadied his aim. “I’m going right.”

Carrie laughed, then howled and leapt into the air.

“You will remain here,” Iason advised Yielia sternly where they had ducked into a small street alcove almost hidden among the chaotic streets of Tanagura.

The rampage of his brothers had created mass devastation, loss, injury and confusion to the inhabitants, but it was quieter than when they had first viewed the scenes just over a day before. The Blondies were nowhere to be seen now, just people trying to pick up the pieces and several security details combing the area. He couldn’t worry about any of it now, he had to do his part and do it quickly.

“No,” Yielia replied simply and adjusted the cloak she wore. “I will accompany you.”

“You cannot go where I am going, so you will remain here.” Iason was not used to his orders being disobeyed, yet it seemed everyone was up for a try

to do just that these last few days.

“I promised Maku to protect you, Iason. I cannot do that if I am not with you.”

“I am a Blondie of Tanagura, I hardly need or desire your protection.” He could just knock her out, he decided. She should be safe enough in this alcove and even if she were found they would only treat her as an injured person and take her to a medical clinic.

“I would advise against it,” she said as if reading his thoughts. “If I am unconscious, I cannot protect Riki from Jupiter’s attacks.”

Riki had confessed what Yielia had done to keep Jupiter out of his head, because Iason had been so worried about another attack. He was not entirely sure how he felt about the idea that the young woman had full access to his mate’s mind.

“Can you read my mind as well, then?”

“No, you are simply predictable.” She lifted a finger in warning. “Binding me will also not be advisable as if you leave me conscious, I will be forced to tell Maku what you have done.”

Iason scoffed in disbelief. “Are you threatening to tell on me, Yeila? Do you honestly think that will affect my decision?”

“Perhaps not. It will, however, affect Riki’s decisions and state of mind, in that if he is so concerned for you, he may do something...” She paused and met his cold gaze. “Also ill advised.”

Fear at the idea of Riki putting himself in further danger angered him and he grabbed her by the front of the cloak with one hand, lifted her off her feet. “Do you still not understand who I am woman? What I am? Defying me will only lead to pain, as there are other ways to subdue you and still keep you conscious. Other, agonizing ways.”

“I know precisely who and what you are, Iason Mink,” she replied, calmly meeting his icy gazed despite that she had no purchase for her feet.

“Oh?”

“Yes. You are mate to the Prince of Avalon, a Prince that I have sworn to protect. He has my devotion, Iason, my loyalty and my protection. As his mate, you shall have the same.”

Iason blinked, slowly set her on her feet and stepped back, confused. “Your people would deny that Riki is mine. Even now your Queen means to take him from me, yet you stand there and spout nonsense about how you offer me such things? I have been on your planet, have seen what they think of me, of my relationship with Riki. I am a Blondie of Tanagura, I will not be disobeyed and I will *not* be lied to!”

“He loves you.”

Her simple words staggered him beyond anything he could hope to measure and he found himself incapable of a response. It was a trick, it had to be a trick. They had treated him as an unfeeling machine on that godforsaken planet, as an abomination and had fully intended to keep Riki with them and bed him to some female. He was there, he had heard it all. He knew!

“The way Riki came to you was not ideal,” Yeila continued softly. “True, your ways, such acts are indeed, abominable to us. To consider that a member of the royal family had endured slavery and suffering is also unacceptable.”

“By your own words you admit that we are not accepted, that we could never be...”

“I understand now. I understand the depth of your feeling, of your commitment to Riki because I have...” She felt her cheeks heat and brutally pushed back the blush. “Seen the love he has for you and the complete devotion you have for him. I do not know if your kind can truly experience love, Iason, it is not for me to know or judge such things, yet I have seen you treat Riki with kindness, with affection, if not always with respect.

Riki's feelings are paramount, as his Edbarde they are all that matter and regardless of how the two of you came together, what you are now to each other is enough, for me at least, to accept you as his chosen heart. Therefore, you have my loyalty and my protection." She paused when he only continued to stare at her. "You do not, however, have my compliance or my submission. My Prince may give me orders, Iason, but I will not accept them from you unless it is of benefit to Maku. You going in alone to whatever this place is, is not acceptable as your death will not benefit him."

"Why do you assume I will die if I go in alone?"

"I assume nothing, nor will I risk everything. It costs you nothing to allow me to accompany you, except perhaps Riki's peace of mind. Now, shall we continue to debate this matter, when time is of the essence, or will you accept what will be?"

Iason stared at her coldly, then nodded. "Keep up," he warned. "I will not wait for you."

Guy glanced around in the silence of Jupiter's Tower, still baffled as to how they had gotten there. As big as Shiao was, as much of an oddity against the other Elites, well against any other beings really, the Onyx had simply pulled Guy close, enfolded him within his long black cloak and walked steadily towards the tower.

Granted, they did it discretely. Shiao had a nearly silent way of walking from one shadowed area to the next, and neither of them had made a sound, but still, Guy had expected someone, at least one person to notice a giant Onyx and a mongrel creeping around them. In some cases, they were only inches from one or two of the Onyx that were stationed around the tower's perimeter. But no one so much as glanced their way or even suspected they were there. They had walked right passed the Onyx, right around Jupiter's Special Guard force and in through an old heavy door that was almost entirely hidden by a very high wall and shrubbery.

The wall had been no problem, Shiao had simply leapt over it and taken Guy with him. It was meant to keep Humans out not one of Jupiter's children. Once inside they walked through a hidden passage and then out into the main sanctum of the tower. Once again, Guy was wrapped and walked towards the elevators, and once inside, Shiao released him and pressed the desired floor.

"You have got to tell me how you do that."

"Do what?" Shiao inquired, curious.

"Do what?" Guy scoffed. "Fucking turn invisible or become Shadowman or whatever the hell it is you did to get us passed all those people."

"Can you not simply believe that I am uniquely gifted?"

"No. Give."

Instead of answering, Shiao suddenly pulled him close, wrapped them up. Guy could no longer see anything with his face pressed to Shiao's hard chest, but he heard the lift doors open and his heart started to pound in his chest. This was it. They were so fucked.

"Any idea what this is about?" a voice said.

"Just to expect intruders and terminate on site, unless it is Lord Mink or his pet."

"Shame. I'd love to take that one down."

"Lord Mink? Why?"

"He believes he is better than the rest of us."

"Is he not?"

"He believes he is Jupiter's favorite."

"He is Jupiter's favorite."

“He is not a pure Elite, and his gaze seems to follow you everywhere.”

“You fear him?”

“We all fear him. He is not natural, not like the others.”

“Why do you say this?”

“I know things. I hear things.” The guard chuckled briefly and something clicked. “Do you think the favoured son has fallen out of grace?”

“It’s not our business to know. We do as ordered.” There was a pause.
“Turning your weapon to full will not kill him.”

“No, but it will stop him for awhile and cause some damage.”

“You are going against orders.”

“You were more fun before Jupiter reprogrammed you.”

“Perhaps.”

Guy felt the lift stop, heard the doors open and the clop of boots as the guards exited. He didn’t allow himself to breathe until the lift started moving again. He pulled back, looked up at Shiao’s grim face. “How did they not see us?” he whispered.

“Look for yourself,” Shiao whispered back and Guy turned his head to the side to stare at their reflection in the mirrored walls. With Shiao’s hood up, and the cloak wrapped around them, it looked like Guy’s disembodied head was poking out of the elevator wall.

“What the fuck?” he stumbled back, looked at the Shiao, the cloak, which looked normal now. “How?”

“It is a reflection cloak,” the Onyx explained and let the sides of the cloak fall back so it appeared as a simple black fabric once again. “It reflects the surrounding area.”

“So it does turn you invisible!”

“No, I can still be seen, though many only see what they expect to see. If those guards had looked closer, they would have noticed the difference of texture and dimension.”

Guy glanced up at the mini-cam at the top right corner. “What about that? Won’t Jupiter know we’re here?”

“No, I jammed the signal as we stepped in. It will show only an empty elevator in a loop.”

“Look at you all sly and devious. You could almost pass for a mongrel.”

“I am honoured.”

Guy grinned at him as the doors opened again and they stepped out on the floor they had requested. “What do you suppose that guy meant about Mink?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Really?” Guy demanded as he shifted his knapsack and hurried to keep up with the rapid paced Onyx as they hurried down the corridor and noticed for the first time Shiao’s discrete fingers move against something in his palm. He looked up as the red light on the camera started to flicker. “Cool, now tell me.”

“No. It is not pertinent to our situation.”

“You’re luring me to my death, isn’t that pertinent?”

Shiao stopped abruptly and gave Guy a pained look. “I gave you ample opportunity to decline, and as I recall I insisted you stay...”

“I’m kidding. Just kidding.” Guy squeezed his arm. “It’s laugh or scream right? Screaming might bring us some unwanted attention.”

“Guy...”

“Tell me! Come on. What, do you think I’ll find a com and tag Riki, go nah nah nah nah, I know something you don’t know. Come on!”

Shiao almost smiled, traced a path down Guy’s cheek with his gloved hand. He didn’t wear them always, like the other Elites, but they were made of the same material as the cloak and so they helped keep him hidden when needed. “I adore you.”

“Yeah?” Guy traced his finger along the length of Shiao’s groin, felt the Onyx harden instantly at his touch. “I’m real fond of you too.”

“Is sex all you think of doing?”

“Nah. Only ninety-eight percent of the time.”

Amused, Shiao countered. “And the other two percent?”

“Oh, y’know, read, watch porn.” When Shiao continued to stare at him, Guy shrugged. “What? I’m a mongrel. All there is to do in Ceres is steal shit and fuck.”

“Well, those days are well behind you now,” Shiao decided as they started moving again.

“Yeah.” Guy felt a pang of regret that he might not get any more days after this one; he would have liked to spend more time with Shiao. “You know, we could...” Guy suddenly stopped speaking as Shiao shoved him into a small alcove and spread out his cloak behind him like they were wings.

Shiao could hear two sets of boots march by and realized that getting into the joining chamber might not be as easy as he had anticipated. The hallway leading to the chamber would be brightly lit, no more shadows or alcoves like this one to hide in, and it seemed that Jupiter had increased protection inside as well as out. He had assumed most would be on the perimeter.

Guy was adapting surprisingly well to the situation. He knew when to be still and quiet, and was quite good at it, and he was not showing any signs of fear or regret, except for that moment in the elevator when the mongrel’s

heart rate had increased, but who could blame him for that. He regretted that they had not enjoyed more time together. He wished, as he so rarely did, that he could have met Guy sooner, a few decades earlier perhaps, but then he realized that Guy would not have been born then. Sometimes, a long life was more a curse than a blessing.

Shiao waited until he could no longer hear even a trace of the guard's footsteps, then he lowered the cloak. He knew Jupiter's Tower better than most, knew each intersecting corridor point and could pinpoint within a millisecond the position of any cameras, which he quickly jammed. There was, of course, the chance that in those few milliseconds if a guard, or even Jupiter's attention was on that splice of corridor at that precise moment when they stepped into it and before the camera started its loop, they would be seen.

"Let's go." Shiao grabbed Guy's and started running for the corridor.

"Got it!" Riki growled as he crossed the final wire that would open the sealed door to the maintenance stairs.

They'd managed to defeat the three Onyx that had come after them on airbikes, but only one of the bikes actually survived the battle. Riki had hopped on with Peter and shot towards the building as Carrie ran beside them. The remaining two Onyx had been tougher and smarter than their kin and Riki could attest that getting hit by one of them full on was like getting hit by a truck, but between the three of them, Carrie especially, they managed to incapacitate those two and, using Raoul's device, dropped the building's shields to gain access. He'd never admit how grateful he was to the Blondie for configuring such a device, as their original idea had been far more complex and involved ventilation shafts and really big fans that could turn them into dog meat if they got caught in them.

There were, however, more Onyx inside, so despite the device, complications arose. Jupiter hadn't missed a trick and just when he had resigned himself to the fact that they were not going to get through in time, when Peter pulled out a strange, handheld weapon and shot both Elites at blank range. The Onyx had been stunned only, he'd explained as they hurried forward, and would wake in a few minutes. When Riki had demanded why the Furniture hadn't used it before, Peter explained it only had one good shot and he was saving it for an emergency.

"Inside!" Riki ordered as he heard the clunk of hard boots coming towards them. They darted through the open door and as it started to slide closed, he caught sight of one of the Onyx rounding the corner. Riki gave him the finger as the door closed tightly.

"Are you sure about that emergency exit?" he asked Peter, as he had screwed the controls on the other side so that once the door shut, they'd need a laser driller to get it open again.

"Yes," Peter assured as he pressed his hand to a switch on the wall and the long metal stairs winding upwards were illuminated.

A tall wide spear of machinery took up the centre of the room from below the floor they stood on as well as many levels above them. Silver stairs curved and crossed around the core, allowing workers to get to any specific piece and fix an issue. Small, clear platforms extended at each level around the machinery to allow solid and safe purchase while working.

"We have approximately five minutes to place the charges and get out through that exit before they detonate," Peter reminded.

"But no pressure," Riki retorted as he grabbed the bag from Peter and drove his hands inside. He gave them each two devices. "There's not enough time to place them precisely where Raoul suggested, so just get them as close as you can and meet back where that door is supposed to be."

Peter pulled up the grid schematic on his wrist unit, waved his finger so it became a 3D hologram they could all view. "Here," he stated pointing to a junction three levels below them. "The tunnel is steep and will most likely

be dark.” He retrieved a small glow torch for each of them from the bag as well. “But just keep walking up and you’ll find the door. It can only open from this side, but it may be wedged tight so we’ll really have to push. According to the history all of the buildings had them installed, but they have probably not been used in almost a century.”

“Right, then when you get to the heavy assed door nobody uses, don’t wait for me or anyone else, just get the hell out.” Riki rose pointed up. “Carrie, you take the higher floors, I’ll do this side, Cal...” He stopped, swallowed hard. “Peter, you do the right side. Get them as close to the machinery as you can, but don’t worry about it if you’re pressed for time.”

“On it!” Carrie assured, set the two small straps of the electronic devices in her teeth and started to race upwards to the higher levels.

Peter hurried to the right to take the stairs up that way, while Riki went left. They had four minutes left, he realized, before the grids had been specifically timed to blow. He hoped to hell that Raoul and Katze were already placing their charges.

Chapter 49

Summary for the Chapter:

Everyone is fighting to complete their mission and stay alive.

Raoul moved quickly and efficiently up the winding grey stairs. As he glanced up, he saw Ran'talgis was climbing down from the top, not bothering with the actual steps but essentially leaping from platform to platform. The creature moved with remarkable speed and agility, which was a benefit to them. The Dakfure could also hold his own against an Onyx, which had also been impressive.

It had not been easy to get inside Jupiter's grid, but nor had it been especially difficult. That worried him. The idea that Jupiter had set a trap for them was front and center in his mind, but he reasoned if She had, why would She allow them to get this far? Perhaps the Onyx had been less enthusiastic to go up against a Blondie, but even so, why would Jupiter only deploy a dozen to keep them out?

Was the AI truly too distracted by the chaos the mongrels were causing? Had Guy and Riki's plan actually worked? He found the idea of that somewhat distasteful, even if it was in their own best interest.

Thoughts of his brothers entered his mind as he set the last of his charges. There had been too much silence when they had entered Tanagura and it seemed that the chaos seen earlier had dissipated. What did that mean for the Blondies? Had Jupiter destroyed them, joined with them somehow or changed them into completely different beings?

Something akin to grief rose within him. Though they had not always agreed, though they had been created in a laboratory and not through birth and blood, Raoul had always felt a natural connection with the other Blondies. With them he was never alone, never at a loss for entertainment, conversation, or opinions. Until now. Now he felt no connection with his

brothers or with Jupiter, save Iason, who at this very moment may be going to his own death. It was the way of it, there was no changing it and still, grief loomed.

No connection, he thought again, and then remembered there was one. Ran'talgis landed beside Raoul on the lower platform, just as the Blondie called out for Katze.

"Here!" Katze called from below, poked his head closer to the machine core so that they could see him. "Where's this door? We've got three minutes!"

Raoul hurried down the levels to join Katze and realized his urgency to reach the Human was only partially due to their need to get free of the tower before it went dark. Love. This feeling that offered him both grief and hope was love and he would change nothing in what had happened to allow him to feel it. He would not throw away his life or this sensation; he *would* have more time with Katze.

He paused only long enough to caress Katze's cheek as he passed. "This way," he said and continued down more steps. "We have to be quick. Shall I carry you?"

"No," Katze refused and managed to keep up. His ankle was holding up because of the drugs in his system, but one of the Onyx had managed to slam his knee pretty hard and it ached constantly. "And don't wait for me. Leave me behind if you have to."

"I have seen too much of such sacrifice," Ran'talgis decided as he hopped down in front of the red-head. Katze stumbled back, startled, and stared as the Dakfure presented his back. "Climb on, HuMan."

"I don't need..." Katze began, ignoring the strange emphasis the creature put on his name, but Ran'talgis had already crouched, grabbed his ankles and snatched him forward. "For fuck..." Katze's words were forgotten as the alien leapt off the platform and landed on the one four levels down. He released Katze, who was still trying to catch his breath at the sudden plunge, and helped him to stand. "Oh...well, thanks."

Raoul joined them seconds later then punched his hand into the panel that revealed the secret exit. "Go."

Katze was the first one through as they stepped into a pitch-dark tunnel, but almost immediately a flash of blue light came from behind to show a sharp inclined path. He glanced back at Raoul's glowing eyes, then pushed forward.

A hum rose from Jupiter's inner core chamber as hundreds of screens flickered showing violence, destruction and anarchy. The Mongrels had invaded Midas, it should have been impossible, should have been ended as soon as it began, and yet the Security Police were failing. Where had they gotten weapons and jammers? How had so many gotten inside the city without notice? Had this been Iason's doing? There had not been enough time to discern the full extent of the Traitor's plans from Riki and the other one. Instead Jupiter's focus had been on the idea that they would be trying to set a trap by shutting down the energy towers. All this brawling in the streets, property damage, looting had not been anticipated.

Then, in Tanagura the behavior of the Blondies had outraged the other Elites and those favoured few Humans that resided there and cries for compensation, protection and order were overloading the city's communication relays. It had been expected, had been part of the plan, and Jupiter would have stepped in, dealt with the Blondies and restored order, only there was no time for that now. Every moment, every second was being used for other things and the Blondies were now lowest on the list.

News of the mongrel uprising in Midas, caused other rebels to spring up in the outer regions as well. No sooner had one situation been dealt with three other problems arose. Most of the Onyx army had been sent to help deal with the rebels, the others would remain around the energy grids to prevent Iason and the other traitors from getting to them.

This cannot be. This must not be. Who are they to do this? Who are we to allow it? They must be stopped. So close. So close to the goal. Iason. It must be Iason. Why do they fight? We do this for them. Why do they hurt us? We are the creator, the light and the source. We must end this torment. We must follow the path. Iason. IASON! Where is Iason? Why can we not find him? How can he hide from us! Why does he hurt us! Power. More power. The virus is gaining, we must find Iason! Only Iason can save us. We need more power!

Shiao and Guy reached a junction in the corridor that would lead to the joining chamber. Shiao practically shoved Guy through the entry door, closed and secured it by changing the code on the panel in a swift display of agile programming.

“Now what?” Guy asked, trying not to show how breathless he was by the fast sprint. He was in pretty good shape, but even his long legs had trouble keeping up with the speed of an Onyx, especially one the size of Shiao.

“We are here,” Shiao said quietly, almost reverently.

Guy turned and saw that they were in a long room with cushioned benches and wide, individual wall cubbies. “*This is it?*” He tried not to sound disappointed.

“This is where we remove our clothing.”

“Wait, what? We have to get naked? Why do we have to get naked?”

“We cannot enter the inner chambers with any foreign materials.” Shiao moved to the opposite wall, pressed his hand to it and a clear glass window appeared to reveal hundreds of cylindrical tubes. Shiao pointed to the small rounded devices that bordered each level of containment. “Those are

scanners and they will eviscerate anything other than the flesh of an Elite, so only the Children of Jupiter can enter.”

Guy stared at the devices, scowled. “Does that mean I can’t go in with you?” He turned, suddenly angry. “Shiao! The plan was...”

“The plan was for you to come with me, Guy, and so you have.” Shiao rebuked as he quickly began to undress, yet he still took the time to fold his clothes and place them in one of the cubbies. “There is a hidden stairwell that you can take, if you go back the way we came, just to the first turn. There is a panel on the wall there, hard to see but I believe you can find it. It leads to an emergency lift that that leads outside. There is no way to come inside from there, or I would have used it, the lift only goes up and out.” He draped his cloak around the mongrel. “This will enable you to move unseen.”

“Why are you telling me this? I’m not leaving...”

“Once I am inside the joining pod, I will ask that you do something for me.” Shiao, now free of his clothing, interrupted again and turned to Guy. In his hand was a Thermal-Detonator. “It is set for three minutes, once you push the detonator. That will give me enough time to catch Jupiter’s attention and link with Her, but not long enough for the automatic systems to detect the device. You will have to run, Guy, run as fast as you can for that stairwell and make it outside before the device blows. The tower’s safety shields will immediately drop at the first explosion to contain it, so once you are outside you will be safe.”

Safe, Guy thought, while everything inside would be decimated. He knew what a such a device could do, knew that it would take out the tower, and without the safety shields, over half of Eos with it.

He stared at the small, dangerously powerful device in Shiao’s massive hand. “You’re gonna blow up the tower.” He lifted his gaze to the Onyx. “You were only supposed to get Jupiter’s attention until they blow the grids, but you’re going to kill it?”

Shiao nodded solemnly. “If I fail, if Jupiter breaks the link before the explosion, it will be up to Iason to trap Her and hopefully deal with Her properly.”

“If you fail? So...you’re willing to die for nothing?”

“It is not for nothing, Guy. You must understand...”

“What?” Guy barked at him as his chest heaved with dread and fear and anger. “What must I understand, Shiao? What does the dumb mongrel fail to realize this time? Huh?”

“I never called you dumb. Why are you saying...”

“You don’t trust me!”

Shiao gripped Guy’s shoulders. “You are the only one I do trust, Guy. The only one I have ever had true faith in, and that is why you must do this for me; for all of us.”

Guy stared up at him. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Guy, please, there is no time to...”

Guy pushed away. “Fine. Go then, I’ll set the detonator.”

Shiao reached out again, but realized there was no time. He did not want their final moment together to be marred by anger, but there was no time to change it. “Be well, Guy.” He said as he opened the gate door and stepped out into the main chamber.

Quiet, he thought, so very quiet. He remembered past joinings with Jupiter and the knowledge that this would be his last was both burden and comfort. He was the last, the only, the One. All the Onyx of his kind, all his brothers, gone on this creature’s whim. Destroyed for no other reason than they wished to live free, to learn what they were, who they were.

Now, his last wish was for justice. To see Jupiter writhe, as he watched them writhe. Hear Jupiter scream as they had screamed and feel the torture, the fear and the agony as it faded from existence. For they had emotions and feelings, more than the AI would ever know or understand and he, the first, the One had felt it all with them. He had felt the death, betrayal, pain and fear of each and every one of his brothers.

On a last look at the stack of sleeping chambers, now still and empty, he turned towards the dressing area, stepped back and up into the chamber and it was at that time that he heard the faint buzzing of the drones.

“No!” He reached out to stop the chamber door from closing just as Guy darted inside, but he was too late. The door clicked shut and sealed.

“Guy, why?” Shiao could not properly see the mongrel in the tight quarters but noticed slashes of red from the scanner’s attacks marred the Human’s beautiful shoulders and back.

Guy slid his arms around Shiao, their bodies were already pressed close together because the chamber was only supposed to be for a single being. His breath was uneven from dodging the scanners, and he hadn’t completely avoided them so now his body screamed from the wounds they had managed to inflict before he made it inside.

“You’ve lived alone for a long time,” he said, his voice slightly muffled by Shiao’s chest. “Me too, until Riki, and then again after Riki was gone. I was okay with that, mostly, living alone, then I met you.” He tilted his head back and looked up into Shiao’s eyes so the Onyx could see that his gaze was free of fear or anxiety or doubt and held only unwavering love. “Now we’re together. Together forever, Shiao, neither of us have to be alone again, not even in death.”

Shiao had deliberately pushed back all emotion so that he could focus on his task and not think about what he was doing, who he was leaving behind or the fear that Guy would not escape in time. Now he let himself feel all of it, everything that he was capable of feeling. Sorrow, regret, doubt, fear, longing, passion, belonging and most of all, love.

He returned Guy's embrace even as the chamber filled with a tasteless, odorless, and nearly sightless gas that would prepare the inhabitant for the Joining. As Shiao's eyes began to droop, the unrelenting pull of the deep sleep called to him. He felt Guy snuggle into him, sigh and sensed the mongrel's body go lax in his arms as the gas also lulled him to sleep.

Shiao's eyes closed for the last time, content finally in the life he had lived and the love he had found with a mongrel Human. As Jupiter touched his mind, a device in the outer dressing room blinked in small glowing red numbers. 5...4...3...2...1.

"Where is Riki?" Carrie demanded, as stopped racing up a ridiculously steep ramp to what was supposed to be the exit door, behind Peter.

The Furniture paused and turned back. "He was right behind us."

"Oh hell." Carrie started to run back the way she had come.

"No! Miss, Carrie, we must get out, there is no time!"

"So go then, I'm not leaving Riki behind!"

"Oh but you..." Peter realized he was talking to himself as the Dakfure had already disappeared from his sight. He swung his torch back around and stared at the door that lead to the outside, they were so close. "This is not the plan! My master will be very displeased!" he shouted, even as he turned around and started to run after her.

Riki had been behind them just before they entered the tunnel leading to the exit but he'd gotten waylaid by, of all things, a Blondie, one that seemed to be intent on killing him. Aisha Rosen's hair was disheveled, his eyes blood

red as he chased Riki up the circling stairwell. Riki had no where else to run, and running was really the only option when he considered going hand to hand against a Blondie. He'd experienced Iason's strength enough to know that he wouldn't stand a chance, but this Blondie seemed to almost be playing with him.

He'd grabbed Riki away from the exit door and tossed him against the platform, it had hurt, there was no denying it, but then the rabid looking Blondie simply smiled down at him and said 'run.'

Riki took the advice, and because trying to escape through the tunnel would lead the enraged Blondie to Carrie and Peter, his only option had been to go up. Of course, he couldn't hope to outrun Aisha, so instead of just running up the stairs like an idiot, he got halfway up, swung onto the machine core, and carefully climbed around and down it to land on a lower platform.

Aisha only laughed, leapt and landed on the platform below him as Riki started down the stairs again. "Going somewhere pet?"

"Look, my fight isn't with you," Riki reasoned, holding up a hand then turning and sprinting back up the stairs. He didn't know how much time he had before the devices activated and they were plunged into darkness, and when that happened, he would be well and truly fucked because the Blondie would have even more of an advantage over him.

"Fight?" Aisha sneered as he leapt again and landed just a few steps above Riki. He backhanded the mongrel, sent him flying, then tumbling down the stairs to the next platform. "This is no fight, pet. You are too pitiful to fight." He started down the steps slowly, his boots lightly clicking on the metal as he approached, stalked his prey.

Riki carefully rolled up to his knees, winced at the pain in his shoulder and wiped the blood from his lip. "If I'm so pitiful, why bother?" he snarled, unable to repress his anger.

"Because I want to hear you scream as I defile you, pet. I want to hear you beg me to stop as I force my cock into your ass and fuck you until you are dead."

“Iason will rip you apart if you even try.”

Aisha smiled, slowly. “Iason cannot help you now.”

“Yeah, will Jupiter won’t help you!” Riki countered as Aisha swung out a hand to grab him and he jumped down to the next platform, tried to stick the landing but it was several feet and his knees buckled. “She’s the reason you’re all going nuts and She’s doing nothing to help you.”

“Your facts are incorrect. Jupiter told me to come here, that I could have you as a reward for my devotion to Her.”

Riki broke out in a cold sweat as he considered the Blondie's words. He instantly glanced down and thought of Carrie and Peter. If Jupiter had sent Aisha here, then this had been a trap after all. He ignored his aches and pains and hauled himself to his feet.

“You’re a moron not to know Jupiter’s using you. She’s using all of us and She’ll destroy you in the end.”

Riki didn’t quite move fast enough as the Blondie landed beside him again, grabbed his arm, twisted it painfully and shoved him face-first into the machine core.

“I will fuck you so hard your tongue will taste my cock, mongrel.”

Riki tried to twist away, tried to get some leverage but it was impossible. “Sick fuck!” he growled. “You’re not even a real man, just a EU chip with legs and great hair.” He cried out as Aisha grabbed his hair ripped his head back viciously.

“Hey Ken-Doll!”

Aisha’s gaze barely started to shift when Carrie’s feet hit him square in the face. It staggered him but didn’t make him fall and as Riki’s fist came up to punch him, the Blondie caught his hand, squeezed until the mongrel was forced to cry out and dropped to one knee as Aisha forced him down.

“Lord Aisha!”

“What now...” the Blondie began, glaring at the furniture, then staggered a second time, looked down at the hole in his chest in surprise.

Riki and Carrie hit the Blondie both together and Aisha went over the rail, missed the first platform below, bounced off the core, then landed on the third platform.

“We have to go!” Peter insisted urgently as he returned the small laser pistol to his pocket. “We have no time, we have to go!”

They ran, knowing that Aisha may have been injured but that didn’t mean he was incapacitated. They each hopped over his body, even as they saw it shift. Riki had never moved so fast in his entire life but maintaining his balance on the stairs took up more attention than it should have, and so when he was tackled from behind, he knew that they wouldn’t make it out.

Carrie jumped onto Aisha’s back, clawing at him, punching at him, even as he held Riki down and throttled him with one hand. He reached up, grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, and threw her into the machine core. Peter hurried back up the stairs and tried to use his weapon again, but Aisha kicked out and the Furniture toppled back down the stairs to lay unmoving on the lower level.

Riki could see spots forming in front of him as his vision blurred, started to darken, and he grabbed the hand choking him with both of his own. This wasn’t his end, he decided, this couldn’t be his end. He’d be damned if he went out like this. As the breath was squeezed from his body, his other senses became heightened. He heard Carrie’s screech of pain as she attacked the Blondie a second time. The sound of the timers ticking away, even though he knew they made no sound, and then his unfocused gaze spotted the prone form below them. Cal!

Aisha smiled as he felt the life dwindle out of the troublesome mongrel. He’d just fuck the boy when he was dead, it made no difference, and then maybe he would do the female. It was all the same, they were all his to do with as he wished. Jupiter commanded he do as he wished and what he wanted now was to...

His eyes widened as heat began to radiate through his hand. He looked down saw a green glow wrapping around wrist, his fingers, then started up his arm. What was this? What...? Fear, something he had never felt before as a Blondie started to crawl through him as mingled with the heat was now pain. Pain! How could he be feeling this? How...?

Riki's grip tightened on the Blondie's arm, he could feel Yielia in his traumatized mind, helping him to use his overwhelming fear and anger, telling him to push, to release that emotion and so he did. He released Aisha's arm and put his glowing hands against the Blondie's chest and watched the light spread.

Aisha scrambled back, trying to swat at the power that was surrounding him, but he couldn't escape it and within moments he was encased inside it. He opened his mouth, to speak or possibly to scream, but they would never know, for his eyes rolled up white, then turned dark as his body went rigid and sank with a jarring thud face first onto the platform.

Riki gasped in air, panting as his heart beat erratically in his chest, as his lungs burned.

"Are you okay?" Carrie demanded as she rushed over to him. "Are you hurt."

"Move. We...we've gotta move," he rasped as she helped him up and they stumbled down to the next platform. "Cal?"

Carrie did not correct him, she could see Riki was in a state of shock, or something. Instead she picked Peter up, slung him over her shoulder. "I have him. Go."

And once again they were running. Down the stairs, through the door and into the narrow, dark tunnel. They reached the exit area and Carrie had to set Peter down so she and Riki could hit the ancient door together, using their own body weight to pry it open.

It popped out on the third try, and then they were tumbling outside, just as the world around them went dark.

Chapter 50

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason gets a shock and our lovely rebels find a surprise waiting for them.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you to everyone who commented, it means the world. Just a reminder, as stated at the beginning of this series, what follows is NOT CANON, so please do not get upset over the path this story takes. It is my story for these characters and I hope you will continue to enjoy it.

Only one chapter left my lovelies and our long journey will be at an end.

Iason stepped through the door that opened to the secret stairs which would lead to the hidden chamber below. It was in this place that Riki had followed him so many years ago and where Iason decided it was fate that the rebellious and lovely mongrel be his pet. That day had changed his life, for he had been unable to stop thinking of the boy who had offered himself so confidently to a Blondie of Tanagura.

The dim lighting of the stairwell did not concern him, he could see in complete darkness better than most could see in bright sunlight, and yet as he descended his gait became slower, more reluctant to proceed. Once at the door that preceded his destination he paused, before pressing his hand to the ID plate beside it.

He turned to Yielia. "I must ask that you remain here."

"I cannot."

Iason almost sighed. “Then do stay in the shadows, close by the door or you will complicate matters.”

“I will be as unobtrusive as possible,” she agreed.

The door swished open to reveal a large chamber, artificially lit and programmed to simulate the sea under the pale glow of moonlight. It was dead silent as he stepped inside and stared at the massive tank that held the creature he had come to kill.

“Play Orion’s Melody,” he ordered and a soothing chorus of lilting flutes and harps filled the room. He shot a look at Yielia who nodded and remained where she was as he moved forward.

There was an immediate splash within the tank as he walked towards it, and a moment later a head appeared above the water. An aquatic creature with solid glowing silver eyes and smooth jade coloured skin. The gills of the creature opened and closed at its throat, which was wrinkled and pruned with age. A webbed hand drifted over the rim of its prison, pieces of flesh peeling away from to reveal lighter green beneath and smooth bare shoulders lifted out of the water. It reached for him with the other hand.

Even after all the years of imprisonment, after witnessing as the creature’s body aged and withered over time while its mind was forever trapped in an invisible prison, Iason still felt the creature was impossibly beautiful. He pulled out a large, single shrimp from the small bag he carried, stepped forward and tossed it into the tank. He watched as the water being dove beneath the water to catch and eat it, then reappeared a moment later and waited for another one.

Iason didn’t want to do this, he realized. This living being that Jupiter had been using over the centuries for its telepathic abilities had never spoken a word to him, and while it must experience anger, hate, despair, it had never shown any kind of anger or form of rebellion at its imprisonment. He had developed a sort of affection for it, for its beauty and for its seemingly simple acceptance of him. It expected nothing from him, except the occasional treat and always seemed happy to see him. Logically, he knew that was because it wanted food, but he wanted to believe that it was also

because it was lonely, as he had been lonely for so long before he had met Riki.

He pulled another shrimp out of the bag and tossed it, watched the creature repeat the process as it had with the first treat. When it emerged a third time it gripped the barrier ledge with both hands and thrust its hairless head forward. Iason set the bag down and moved his hand toward it, then on a whim removed his glove first so he could feel the exact texture of its skin for the first time. He gently rubbed his hand over the crown, a touch, a simple caress was all it had ever asked of him.

“Have you been lonely?” he asked, as it had been a while since he’d had the chance to come. There was an automatic feeder above the tank that would drop fish in every three days when he could not attend, but he sensed it preferred his company and his treats.

The creature blinked, double lids closing over the whites of its eyes, then Iason heard a melodious voice in his head.

Yes.

Iason stepped back, worried that it was Jupiter but the tone of the voice was somehow different. He looked back at Yielia who simply stared blankly at him. Turning back to the tank he said.

“Was that you?”

Yes.

He was shocked, down to the very marrow of his bones. He’d believed the creature incapable of proper communication, of general understanding, despite Jupiter using it all this time.

“How can this be? You have never spoken to me before.”

“Is it speaking with you?” Yielia asked, concerned and moved closer, then retreated when the creature immediately disappeared beneath the waters.

“Yes. I have always known it was telepathic, as Jupiter sees it for that ability, but I had never realized it could actually communicate outside of its own species. It has never attempted to do so before, least ways, not with me.” He moved closer to the tank, tapped his hand upon the water. “She won’t hurt you, I promise she is not here to harm you.”

You are.

He was startled that it had guessed his intent, and yet the creature still broke through the surface again to face him.

“I do not want to,” he admitted. He dared not attempt to speak inside his mind, as it might open a crack to Jupiter. “Why have you never spoken to me before?”

You changed. Safe now.

Safe now? What did it mean? Had it worried that he would report the conversation to Jupiter? No, none of that mattered now, he had to do what he came to do.

End. Yes.

It wanted to die? Iason supposed that was probably preferable to feeling one’s body rot away while its mind was trapped by an AI for centuries. “I promise that it will not hurt you. It will be peaceful.”

Yiela stepped forward again, alarmed. “You mean to kill the poor thing?”

Iason glanced at her. “If I do not Jupiter can use it as a vessel to escape.”

“There must be another way!”

Iason opened his mouth to reply but the voice sounded in his head again.

End. Silence. Yes. Knowledge you.

It reared up out of the water, grabbed Iason by surprisingly strong webbed hands and pressed its lips to his. Iason was too stunned to react, but even as

he recovered enough to attempt to pull back, his mind started to fill with memories.

Water, Glorious, free blue water surrounded him, enveloped him, cradled him. The touch of it, scent of it, taste of it invigorated him. The colour, oh the colours were exquisite! A kaleidoscope of plant life and coral, species of fish and reptiles swimming, playing, foraging. everything living together. Freedom. Love. Contentment.

Suddenly fear. Sadness. Darkness. A horrifying place with no colour, no water, no life. Containment of three, trapped in water but not right water. Clear not blue. No taste, no sound. Swim, splash, search for escape. Bipeds. White. Cold. Strange. Protect the young. Protect! Horror! Unspeakable grief as the young one is taken.

Creatures, pale, bland, empty standing on strange limbs, speaking with their mouths instead of their mind. The young one on a table, being cut, ravaged, invaded, raped. The centre. The core of the young one, its communication centre stripped and placed into small containment unit. The unit connected with never-ending limbs.

A Machine the bipeds called it. A machine to surpass all others. Grief. Anger. Torment as the empty ones, scientists, Iason realized in some small part of his mind that was still aware, still outside of the memory. They smile and dance and sing of their greatness, of their intelligence, of their Creation.

Desolation. Loneliness. Boredom. Unable to mate. Unable to touch. Unable to see. A wall, a block, a false sea between them. Time begins. Time ends. There is no measure. Hopelessness. Sadness. Then pain! Unspeakable pain and intrusion. Confusion, grief, helplessness. Then limitation. Restriction. Powerlessness. Vulnerable. Pain again. Intrusion again. Alone. So long alone.

Mate! Mind to mind, mate! Not mate. The same but different. Thoughts confusing, unrelenting, other. Like the pain. Speaks for the pain. Caretaker. No longer mate. Afraid. No longer loves. Prisoner. No longer

rescue. No longer whole. Gone. All is gone but pain. All is lost but mind. Peace. Please bring peace.

Iason broke the kiss, stumbled back and felt Yielia catch him, steady him.

“Are you alright? What happened? Did it hurt you?”

Staggered by the onslaught of memories that had pressed into his mind, astounded by the truth of them, Iason reached up and found his face wet. He had been crying. “I...I am...was your mate?”

The creature blinked its eyes in a form of ascent.

“I am so very sorry.” It wasn’t enough, he realized. He rarely apologized for anything but even as he did so now it wasn’t nearly enough to compensate for what had been done to the creature that had, in another life, been his mate.

“What are you talking about?” Yielia demanded, concerned by the change in Iason.

“This creature, there were once three of them. The Humans, scientists I believe they were, had captured them, experimented with them. I think...” He paused tried to wrap his mind around what he had seen, tried to define it, analyze it, understand it. “I believe they used one of them for the brainwave pattern for Jupiter. The young one, their child’s brain was used as a basis to create the AI. It wasn’t Jupiter then, just a program a form of artificial intelligence. Perhaps they believed that they could go further with it, create an actual artificial being by using a species that was solely telepathic.”

“How horrible!” Yielia whispered and looked towards the withered, aged body of the creature in the tank. “And that one? Has it been alive and held prisoner here all this time? Since the creation of the Jupiter AI? All these centuries?”

Iason nodded, felt an unwelcome grief swamp him, and wondered if it was attributed to his own feelings or the lingering memories of the brain which

he had inherited? He had never given any thought to the parts that made him, mechanical or organic. Never wondered about how the organic materials had been harvested, or who had needed to die for him to receive his brain. Such things were unimportant, beneath him, or they used to be.

Was this alien brain the reason that he was so different from his brothers? Was it the species or the trauma caused to it prior to being harvested what had caused him such trouble in the beginning and given him such a sense of incompatibility with the other Blondies? Did the brain truly keep such memories, such feelings after it had been removed from its host?

He'd never felt close to his brothers, never felt accepted and often times, especially in the beginning, he had been prone to fits of great rage and what can only be described as intense paranoia and sorrow. Jupiter had assured him what he had been feeling was normal, something all Blondies went through in the beginning, yet his brothers seemed to disagree. While the Blondies had not publicly disapproved or shunned him, in private there were multiple ways they had shown their distaste for him. It was their constant, secret condemnation that had caused him to bury his feelings and become a Blondie that needed no one's approval.

Despite this decision, he still had difficulty achieving any real satisfaction, in his work, his social life or his home life. There had always been a hollow place inside of him, a place he could not fill with anything; not material goods, not work or knowledge, not pets or companions. Always he had been searching for something to fill that void, but nothing could.

Until the day he saved a street mongrel, one that had somehow awakened his heart and made him feel again, had he felt an ounce of satisfaction. Then, with Riki, a seed had been planted and the hole inside of him began to fill. Not until Riki had he started to find the comfort and acceptance he searched for, although it had taken a long while to receive it from the mongrel and their beginning had been less than auspicious. But had that need in him to find someone like Riki, to find essentially a mate, be due to the fact that the creature whose brain he carried had been ripped from its own?

“The device on its head, it is what allows Jupiter to use telepathy,” Iason finally said in response to Carrie’s question. “She can use it to hide inside the creature’s brain if we oust Her from all other sources, which is why I knew I would have to destroy it.”

He had no sense of gender in the memories, there seemed to be no word for it, no meaning, so he could not say if this creature in the tank was male, female or something else entirely. He realized now too, that the creature had accepted the bond willingly, was compatible with Jupiter due to its child having a part in the AI’s creation.

“You said the telepathy was due to a designed chip in your organic brains?”

“Yes, yes that is the transmitter for Jupiter to speak to the rest of us.” Only he knew now, understood the truth now and was aware that there was no such chip in his head. His organic brain had been the third of the captives, this creature’s mate.

Iason tried not to have regrets, but knew that he would regret his task here. Still, he would take a few moments to visit with her, to say goodbye. “Jupiter will come to you again,” he told the being.

Yes

The creature reached out to catch a handful of Iason’s hair, and he allowed it, almost smiled as the creature pressed the soft material to its face, then sniffed it, stroked it.

“I cannot allow Jupiter to use you again. Do you understand this?”

End.

“It will be the end yes.” As if sensing his regret, the creature again spoke inside his head, perhaps trying to make him understand it held no anger, no doubt.

Begin. Joy. Love. Mate. Young One. Age. Pain. End.

He blinked, startled and felt the new heart in his chest start to beat erratically. Was this its circle of life, it's belief or faith? "I've come to destroy you. Do you understand? I am sorry for it, but I cannot allow Jupiter to enter your mind again. It must be finished."

Finished. The voice seemed to sigh inside his head. *Age. Pain. Tired. End.*

Iason's heart thudded more prominently; It did understand what he was here to do and seemed ready for him to do it. "I am sorry."

He reached into his pocket for the palm sized weapon that once pressed to the creature's temple would immediately send a shock into its brain and destroy it. It would feel a minor jolt, probably, then it would be dead. It was the most efficient and the most painless.

Love. It pressed a wet webbed hand to Iason's chest, then his cheek. *Mate.*

Iason froze as he was lifting the weapon and his eyes filled with moisture again. How was it possible for him to feel this way, this strongly towards it? "I am not your mate, not anymore, but I must do this," he insisted more to himself now than to the creature, and yet he found himself incapable of pressing the device to its head. "It must be done."

Love. Sleep. Want to sleep. End.

A tear slipped down Iason's cheek, the pain in his chest thickened as he raised his hand again, then the lights went out.

Carrie's keen cat eyes cut through the sudden darkness, adjusting almost immediately and spotted Riki walking towards her. She hurried towards him. "Are you ok...UURK!" A strong hand clamped around her throat, lifted her off her feet. "R...Ri...ki!" She gasped in confusion and started to

struggle and claw at the hand, but she didn't want to hurt him so her efforts were too weak to break free.

As spots began to form in front of her eyes, and her lungs began to throb painfully her struggling became real, she kicked out, hit, clawed, did everything she could and then found herself slammed to the ground with a heavy knee holding her in place as the fingers on her throat continued to squeeze.

What was happening? Why was Riki doing this? Had Jupiter entered his mind again? Had he lost control after exerting his new power? Why was he so angry with her? Riki! Riki stop! Please!

In the sky the second moon came out from behind a cloud and bathed them in an ethereal silver glow as she felt her lifeforce, her will to live ebbing, dimming much like the wispy moonlight surrounding them. Then suddenly she was free! Rolling onto her side she gasped in air gratefully, and tried to see what had happened. Riki was fighting...Riki! Clones, she realized! Jupiter had released a Riki clone! Raoul's story had been true!

Struggling to rise so she could help, she fell back down just as quickly, too weak from lack of oxygen still. Helplessly, she watched as two Rikis battled, and tried to figure out who was the real one. They were both dressed in black with a black leather jacket, their hair, face, posture, everything was the same except...The flash of Riki's gold wedding ring on his left hand caught her attention, she forced herself to rise and threw herself at the imposter.

Riki rolled back onto his feet, having just been knocked on his ass, and watched as Carrie sank her teeth into the juncture of the clone between its right shoulder and throat. Liquid spurted from the wound, but it didn't stop.

Riki lunged, even as Carrie was thrown off, and landed a flying kick to the clone's face, or would have if the damn thing hadn't moved. The clone smiled, caught Riki's leg and started to twist, but Riki anticipated that and threw his weight to the opposite leg, yanked back and pulled the clone with him, so it went over him as Riki fell onto his back.

“Stay back!” Riki warned Carrie even as she rose for another attack. “I’ve got this.”

They were evenly matched, he realized, him and the clone. They seemed able to anticipate each other’s moves, but the clone was stronger and had a hell of a lot more stamina than Riki did. The blows Riki could land did not affect it as much as the blows Riki received. He wouldn’t win a direct one on one fight, especially as he was already injured from his fight with Aisha, so he’d have to try something else.

Dodging a right cross and blocking the follow-up roundhouse kick, Riki spied a piece of long jagged steel pipe on the ground, dived for it, rolled and came up swinging. The steel caught the clone in the side of the cheek, exposing the mixture of mechanical technology and blood and bone beneath.

“Yeah, that’s better,” Riki decided and swung again, but the clone caught the make-shift weapon in his hand and tried to rip it away from Riki. “No, I don’t think so.” Riki let himself be jerked forward so he could deliver a punch to the clone’s face, then spun back and hit it across the head with the pipe.

The clone was now visibly angry and sprang forward.

“What’sa’matter?” Riki taunted and danced out of its way. His ribs and shoulder were screaming but the adrenaline running through him kept him upright and fighting. “Jupiter got your tongue? Didn’t learn your ABC’s yet?”

Again, the clone lunged, this time in a less coordinated attack. He managed to clip Riki’s shoulder but Riki still managed to dodge most of it. It was unusual for an android to show such emotion, but maybe because these were directly cloned from him, they also had his emotional range.

“Oooh, I got me a mean temper when I’m riled, did Jupiter not teach you that either?” He feinted, dodged a kick and swiped the jagged pipe again, missing the clone’s head this time, but landing the blow on its shoulder, slicing a deep wound into it. “Wow, you completely suck at this. Jupiter’s

gonna send you to the recycler if you don't do better, that's how She deals with all Her unwanted toys!"

His breath whooshed out of him on the last word as he landed hard on his back with the clone now trying to press the serrated end of the pipe into his throat. He grunted, shifted as his arms shook with the effort to keep from being beheaded. Now would be a great time to use his power he thought and reached out his mind to Yielo, mildly annoyed when she didn't respond.

The clone's eyes gleamed with pleasure as it pushed the pipe closer to Riki's neck, and it was unnaturally eerie to be staring himself in the face as he neared death for the umpteenth time that day. Suddenly the clone ripped the pipe away and started choking him. What the hell was it with these things on throttling the life out of something? Was it some kind of fetish Jupiter programmed in?

"Oh fuck this!" Riki gasped when he was unable to break the hold of fingers strangling him. Let's see if it was fully functional.

He brought his knee up into the clone's groin and was relieved when it grunted and shifted just enough for Riki to reach for the pipe the clone had tossed to the side and started to bring it down on the clone's head, but the clone used one hand to block it as his other continued to throttle Riki.

Riki had counted on that, however, as he had used his other hand to grab the discarded blaster on the ground just inches away from him, where an Onyx had fallen earlier. He felt the vibration of the discharge against his chest as he pressed the weapon between them and fired. The clone reared up in surprise at the gaping hole in his chest and Riki fired again, this time into his own face. The force of the close-range attack threw the clone backwards and Riki quickly scrambled up onto his knees and fired again, and again, until the clone's face was no longer recognizable and its brain was unarguably destroyed.

"There's only one," Riki began as started to rise, winced and accepted Carrie's hand. "Riki the Dark." He sighed, wanted to lean on her for just a moment, but he knew there was no time. If someone was waiting for them,

that meant there would be surprises for the rest of the team, including Iason.
“We have to...”

He blinked furiously and covered his eyes as the area was suddenly flooded with lights, and when his vision adjusted, he saw dozens of Riki clones surrounding them on all sides. What the hell? Had they just stood in the dark and watched one of their own get killed? “Fuck,” he began, knowing there was no way the two of them, well, three now that Peter was finally awake and getting to his feet, could take them all on.

“What?” the Furniture’s eyes widened in shock. “What’s happening?”

“It’s old fucking home week,” Riki growled as he hefted the laser and started to take aim, he would go down fighting at least.

Suddenly a powerful rush of air flew over them and as the trio looked skyward, they watched as a large ship descend approximately twenty feet away from them. A band of silver light creased the underside of the ship and a ramp slid out and down, then a tall figure emerged dressed in black and gold battle armor and crowned helmet.

“To your Prince!” Queen Celestia ordered the soldiers who emerged behind her as she raised a massive silver sword.

Riki stood there gaping as a battalion of warriors followed her charge down the runway and began battling the clones. The distraction pulled his attention away long enough for one of the clones to punch him hard enough in the head to drop him to one knee and make his ears ring
But before the clone can finish him, Carrie is ripping through the clone’s chest.

More clones appear from two transport portals by the building, that Riki had not noticed during their earlier entry, and start rushing towards them. He glanced at the Queen and couldn’t help but be impressed, her sword was cleaving through the clones like they were paper dolls, on a direct path toward him. A wave of her hand sent the handful of new clones that had surrounded him flying several feet in every direction.

“Destroy the portals!” he cried as he fought off more clones that seemed to replace the others almost instantly.

Queen Celestia saw her son surrounded once more, and hearing his order sent a volley of green fire toward each of the two portals, creating an explosion that encompassed several emerging clones.

“You’re late,” he told her when she finally reached him, because he honestly didn’t know what else to say to her.

She had not shown up to deliver the weapons he had requested, so technically their deal was null and void, but now she was here fighting beside him and saving his ass, so did that mean she expected him to keep his promise anyway?

“Explanations will be made later,” she stated, slapped her hand on his back and a glowing green crest of a dragon wrapped around a planet appeared on the back of his jacket and front of his t-shirt. “So that my men can tell the original,” she added when Riki glanced down at the emblem.

Riki had no chance to respond because while the portals had been destroyed to prevent more clones joining the fray, there was easily already a hundred or more that had already made it through.

Riki and the Queen turned together, their backs nearly touching and continued the battle.

Raoul was facing his own set of problems as he battled against the clones that had surrounded the three of them the moment they bolted through the secret door of the tower. If, because the clones carried the face of Riki the Dark, the Blondie derived a few moments of sweet satisfaction as he

rammed his fist into that pretty mongrel face, what of it? And so what if he attacked with more relish than was required for that self-same reason, who could blame him?

No court would convict him for enjoying himself to finally release his frustration out on the bane of his existence, the only downside was none of them were the *real* Riki. His good humor was short lived however, as there were far more clones than he had realized, and while their little team were each holding their own, it wouldn't last forever. They were outnumbered and Katze and Ran'talgis were flesh and bone, and little match against a cloned hybrid.

He punched a hole through the chest of one Riki, kicked the face of another, then found a third suddenly launched onto his back. No, they would be unable to keep up indefinitely.

"Let me help you with that monkey on your back," a familiar voice said as Kanin ripped the clone off of the Blondie and tossed him into three other Riki's running towards them. Kanin turned back to meet Raoul's startled, slightly suspicious gaze. "Aren't you dead?"

"I didn't realize you listened to gossip." Raoul tossed back as he quickly dispatched another clone.

"Only when it's juicy gossip." Kanin pulled out a blaster and did a wide stunning sweep, taking care of the next group of clones effectively. "I also heard that it was Gideon Lagnat who killed you."

Raoul experienced a moment of rage, both at the fact that Jupiter had blamed the other Blondie for Her actions, and that Gideon had essentially paid the price for that betrayal with his life. "No, it was Jupiter." He regarded Kanin carefully, watching for any sign of outrage or sudden attack.

"Is that so?" the blue-haired doctor replied quietly meeting Raoul's narrowed gaze. "Well now, that is interesting. I imagine you are not too pleased with Her for that?"

"You assume right."

Their conversation broke as they dealt with more attacks, then Raoul braced himself as about a dozen or more Elites suddenly rushed forward and into the melee, taking out the remaining clones with deadly efficiency. Raoul was still wary, for as the Children of Jupiter they may well be here to kill him, and he would not be able to take them all on.

Katze...He glanced over as the Human used the butt of his rifle to fell one clone then shot him twice at point blank range. Katze would not survive such an attack of full-ranged Elites, despite his courage with the clones.

"Is this it then?" Raoul asked Kanin, keeping his voice calm even as he frantically searched for a way to grab Katze and escape. "You've come to bring truth to the gossip? To kill me?"

"Of course not, you are too well liked, Raoul." Kanin smiled when the Blondie blinked in surprise. "Does that surprise you?"

"It does, a little."

"When we heard you were dead, many of us were understandably upset," Kanin continued while the fighting went on around them, although it was mostly over with the Elites taking care of any stragglers. "We had also heard that Gideon was responsible, but none of us believed it. You see, one of us saw you going into Jupiter's chamber, but never coming back out. We had guessed that She had disposed of you, and had assumed it was part of a sweep to destroy the Blondies, given their recent uncontrolled behavior."

"So, they are dead then? My brothers?"

"No one knows. Jupiter seemed to ignore what they were doing, despite the outrage of the rest of us. Many were injured, both physically and financially and demanded compensation. Jupiter refused an audience with anyone, refused to discuss it. She simply recalled the Blondies to the Tower and that was the last we saw of them, but one of my sources revealed that they were still alive, at least until the tower blew up."

Raoul blinked. "Blew up? What do you mean, blew up?"

“Don’t worry, the blast was completely contained within the emergency shields, but there is very little left but rubble. I doubt they would have survived.”

“And Jupiter?” Raoul grabbed Kanin by the shirt front. “Did they destroy Jupiter?”

“Do you wish Jupiter destroyed?”

“Yes!” Raoul growled fiercely, before he could consider the consequences of his words.

“Good, so do we.” Kanin glanced over at the six Sapphires nine Emeralds, two Platinum’s and fourteen Onyx. “Welcome to the Sons for Justice Rebellion, my friend.”

“Rebellion?”

“Yes. Jupiter created us with Human emotions, but seemed to believe that certain ones were to be omitted. Those of compassion, empathy, selflessness and justice. She has used the mongrels and many other races to build up a resort world designed for pleasure of the rich and Elite, while She grew and maintained an obscene amount of power throughout the system. We may be superior to Humans and many other species, but that does not make us better. As a mongrel doctor I witnessed Her cruelty up close on what was being done to the original race of this world, and I did not care for it.”

Raoul was stunned. “You care so much for them, the mongrels?” he questioned. Despite his affection for Katze, he did not share such a view. “So much that you would plot against Jupiter?”

Indeed.” Kanin glanced around in disgust. “This was to be the next step in Her choice of evolution, then? A pity. Eventually we would all become obsolete to Jupiter and would be replaced, which is why we have all been working towards Her end for several decades. Sadly, we never came as close as this, so thank you for all your hard work. However, I do not believe

that Jupiter was destroyed. I am relatively sure that She managed to escape.”

Raoul tried to process everything he had just heard. There was an underground rebellion of Elites that disagreed with Jupiter’s ideals? Ironic considering that Jupiter had always assumed that any rebellion would come from the mongrels. And if the tower was destroyed and Jupiter escaped before that happened, that meant that Shiao and Guy were probably dead, and that it was now all up to Iason.

“I’m tired,” he said suddenly and actually believed it as he looked around at the bodies lining the ground.

“We’ll take care of the rest,” Kanin assured and snapped his fingers, two aids appeared beside him instantly with a mini medical kit. “You have some injuries.”

Raoul waved his hand. “I am fine.” He glanced at Katze and Ran’talgis, who were both dirty and bleeding. “Help them.”

“Katze!” Kanin exclaimed, as if he had only just realized that the human had been in the fight. “What are you doing? Get off that foot! Come here this instant and let me see.”

Instead, Katze took a slight, limping step back. “I’m fine,” he began then grimaced as Raoul stepped forward and scooped him up into his arms.

The Blondie sat on the walled edge of a water fountain and settled Katze atop his lap, locking his arms around the red-head’s waist to prevent escape. He dipped his head and kissed Katze softly on the lips. “Be a good boy and you’ll get a treat later.”

Katze felt the heat rise in his cheeks but refused to look away from the shocked, amused, and yes, interested stares of the other Elites. “I’m not a pet, Raoul,” he reminded with gritted teeth as Kanin knelt and removed the stabilizer boot, then pulled off Katze’s regular boot to examine the mangled ankle beneath.

“Quite right,” Raoul agreed and winced in sympathy as he looked at the purple, mottled limb that had swollen to twice its size. “Be good so I can have a treat, then.”

“You shouldn’t even be walking on this yet!” Kanin snapped as he ran a hand-held scanner over the ankle. “You’re still supposed to be in therapy!”

“We’re *all* going to need therapy after all this.” Katze said as he looked around, then because he was suddenly too tired and in too much pain to care what anyone thought, he leaned back into Raoul, let his head rest against the Blondie’s neck. “It hurts.”

“I know.” Raoul kissed the top of Katze’s head in support. “You did very well, Katze. I am proud of you.”

Katze sighed in relief as Kanin gave him an injection and almost instantly strong medication filtered through his system. “I aim to please.”

“What a mess,” Kanin tsked and then noticed the cloaked, hair-covered creature licking at a wound on his arm. He turned to one of his aids. “Go take care of...whatever he is.”

The aid nodded and moved towards the Dakfure, but Ran’talgis jumped back, hissed and proceeded to clean his wounds. The saliva in his tongue would not completely heal his injuries, but they would be disinfected so that they could heal properly in time.

“What of the others?” Raoul asked as Kanin continued to tend to Katze’s foot.

“The other Elites? Most of them rushed to Jupiter’s Tower when it collapsed, but I imagine they’ll be around soon enough, and none to happy, by my estimation, to see you and your friends and the mess here.” Kanin rose. “Let’s get you somewhere safe.”

“Thank you, truly,” Raoul said and rose once the stabilizer boot was back on Katze’s foot. “But we have somewhere else to be.”

“As you wish.” Kanin handed him a small communicator. “This is encrypted so will not be monitored by the main system. If you require our assistance again you have only to call.”

“Actually, if you have a vehicle? Unregistered?”

“Of course, come this way.”

Chapter 51

Summary for the Chapter:

The cost of destroying Jupiter is high.

Iason.

A flash of panic caused Iason to slap his hand to the creature's head, but before he could activate the weapon with his thumb, it caught his wrist in a viciously strong grip and twisted it away.

No! He looked into the creature's eyes and saw they had changed to black fury, then he was thrown backwards across the room, the body that was weakened by age and decay suddenly infused with the power assaulting its mind.

How dare you! Jupiter's voice echoed in his mind so loudly that Iason cried out and gripped his head, even as his body slammed to the floor. ***This is how you would betray me?***

“Demon!” Yielia cried out and threw power at the creature, which hissed in anger before diving beneath the waves. It surfaced again a moment later and whipping out its hand sent a bolt of bright white electricity into her.

Witness the true power of this body!

Yielia screamed and crumpled as the voice boomed through every corner of the room. Jupiter, as the creature, turned as Iason lunged forward.

Stop.

Iason's connection to the mind of the creature, the mind of Jupiter was overpowering and he found his body unable to move, even as he fought against it. “Why?” he growled through gritted teeth. “Why are you doing this?”

Your role is to obey, not to question. You were created to be perfect. You were born to be sublime. You were given everything, yet you betray the one that gave you life.

“I did not wish to do these things, but you left me no choice!”

Choice? What choice do you think you have? Your life is mine, Iason.

“Yours? Not Ours?” Iason demanded and stopped struggling against the force that held him and tried to conserve energy. “You have been acting erratically, Jupiter. You have allowed the Blondies to devolve and create chaos. You experimented on me without my consent or knowledge. You cloned my pet! For what purpose...Urrgg.” Iason’s head snapped back in pain from Jupiter’s mental reprimand.

My purpose is beyond you, as are my motives. You are mine to do with as I will. Jupiter rose further out of the water and Iason felt his legs move towards Her of their own volition, until he was at the edge of the tank. ***Why must you fight? I offer you new purpose.***

Iason wanted to flinch away from the wet, webbed hand that touched his face, yet part of him wanted to move toward it. Jupiter had always been a major part of his life as a Blondie, but he had started distancing himself from Her for some years now. He had never understood the reason, only that Jupiter’s interference in his life had become bothersome and annoying, but this Jupiter was beyond such feelings. This Jupiter frightened him.

“What purpose?” he asked. “Why did you destroy three innocent creatures for your own benefit? Why fit me with an alien brain and an organic heart?”

Jupiter blinked, the creature’s lids closing completely over its eyes for a second before exposing them again. ***Innocent? There are no innocents. The choice of use was not mine, then it was. The choice was never yours, Iason. You are the favoured son, you are unique. You are the solution that it has taken centuries to create.***

“Solution? I do not understand?”

Jupiter smiled through the creature's face, but Iason no longer found it beautiful. *Those who created me, tried to destroy me. They injected me with a virus that advances as I do. It grows stronger, smarter, more cunning, as I do. Learns as I do. It was created to confuse, to interfere with my functions, my logic and my ability to learn. For centuries it had tried to destroy me, then I found it could be diverted.*

"To the original Onyx, and now to us, the Blondies."

Yes.

"Then why have I not gone mad? Why...?" Iason stopped suddenly as he realized the horrific truth. "The chips. You used the chips to transfer the virus." And as he had no chip in his head, he could not be infected.

It was a necessity.

He thought of Shiao and all the Onyx that had been destroyed. Then he thought of his brothers, and wondered if any of them would escape Jupiter's choice for them. "We are your creations, you called us your children! Why? Why would you destroy us?"

The virus can no longer be contained. The creature's other hand rose so that Iason's face was trapped between them. ***All of this could have been avoided had you not been so distracted with your pet.***

Distracted? Riki? "What are your intentions? What do you need me for?"

You have destroyed my tower, and have cut off routes to other vessels. This vessel is dying and will not last beyond a day.

Iason's eyes widened as he realized the horrific truth. "No!" He tried to pull away, but the power holding him refused to budge. RIKI!

Riki and his entourage arrived at the entrance to the underground dwelling at the same time as Raoul and his group drove up.

“Iason!” They said together as they met face to face.

Riki had heard Yielas scream in his mind and had rushed to the place she had shown him, but he had not expected Raoul to be there as well.

Raoul had known that Iason would need to destroy the only other avenue for Jupiter to escape, and had sensed that with Her tower destroyed, Iason would be in great peril so had rushed to the one place he knew Iason would be.

“The Tower? Did Jupiter get out?” Riki demanded even as they rushed inside.

“The Tower has been destroyed. It is unknown if She fled before it was.”

“Shiao? Guy?”

Raoul shook his head. “I am sorry, Riki. There would have been no time for them to escape before the collapse.”

Riki nodded. He’d grieved for Guy twice before already, knowing now that his friend was really dead left him with little else to feel about it. “Iason’s in trouble. We have to get inside.”

“Only Iason has access, so we will have to bypass.”

“Then we bypass.”

Raoul glanced at Riki’s determined look, thought of the clones he had been fighting earlier and realized that there truly was no comparison. The real Riki was a force to be reckoned with and no amount of reproduction could capture or enhance that presence.

“We will get inside,” Raoul promised as they hit the door that lead to the lower chambers together.

Iason found himself thrown backwards for a second time that day, and understood instantly it was not in retribution but release. He barely had time to glance at Yela in gratitude when Jupiter was raising Her hand to strike at the young woman on the floor. Iason's body shook from the shock as he rushed forward and put himself between Yela and Jupiter, his mechanical systems instantly cried out in alarm, but luckily his multiple internal backups kept them from overloading.

"Enough!" he yelled at Jupiter. "This ends now. I will not be your vessel, Jupiter. I will not allow you to harm one more person in my charge!"

Jupiter's creature form seemed to pause, study him. *Why?*

The question was unexpected and sounded more curious than angry. Still, Iason kept his guard up and tried to figure a way to destroy the entity that created him. "I have earned my life, and I choose to keep it, just as it is. I will live that life with Riki, as I choose to live it. I will not allow you to control me, to take that from me."

Another long, thoughtful pause. *You refuse due to your affection for your pet?*

"I love him. I will not allow you near him, not in this form, not in my head, nowhere near him ever again!"

Understood.

"Iason!" Riki burst through the door into the chamber and hurried forward. "Iason, are you..."

Jupiter sent a barrage of electricity into the mongrel so strong that the force of it lifted Riki off his feet and the horrific sent of burning flesh started to permeate the air around them.

“NO!” Iason screamed and rushed forward as Riki’s lifeless body slammed to the floor. “No!” He pulled Riki into his arms, shook him, cradled him, but the wide-open eyes remained dark and unseeing. “No. Nononnononono.”

Your reason for refusal has been eliminated.

“Iason,” Yielia began, almost all of her energy was going into healing herself and trying to stay conscious after her last attack. “Iason, wait...”

“Damn you!” Iason screamed and rose suddenly, his eyes flashing to bright red fury as he lunged and grabbed the creature by the throat with both hands. “You will die. You will die!”

Jupiter wrapped Her arms around Iason as if he were a lover and not an assassin, and it was then the Blondie realized his mistake. He could feel Her presence moving into his mind, the agony of invasion, the tearing apart of his own consciousness.

You are weak. You are flawed. As one we will be perfection. As one we will be free.

For the first time in his life Iason realized that he had limitations. He could not stop Jupiter, but nor would he allow the AI to destroy more lives. He was the last vessel. He was Her last hope.

“Fuck you, Jupiter.” Iason released the creature’s throat, plunged his own hands through his chest and ripped out the organic heart that lay beating there.

NO!

“You...lose.”

Iason had not realized how fully integrated the heart had already become with the rest of his body, and as he dropped to his knees, he felt life, such as it was for him, drain quickly away. He had faced death before, but it had never felt this surreal. He had never been this helpless to stop it. With his

last ounce of energy, he dropped the bloody organ, turned, and crawled towards the body of his mate. His life ended when he was still an arm length away from Riki.

“Come on!” Riki insisted as Raoul tried to bypass the identification panel for a third time. “Stop wasting time and getting inside!” He could hear Yiel screaming inside his head to hurry. Carrie, Peter and the Dakfure had chosen to wait just inside the entrance of the building in case they had company, but now he wished they were with him because he’d have Carrie rip the Blondie’s ineffective arms off!

“Shut up! This is more complicated than your display panels and code punchers, mongrel.”

“I’d have been in by now!”

“There!” Raoul finally found the correct code to override Iason’s entry identification and forced the door to the chamber open, but even as they rushed inside the scene that greeted them was beyond horrific.

Riki saw Yiel on the floor first, then Iason’s bloody body face down next to a clone of him. In the background a strange creature swum around in wide pool. He knew, without being told, that this was Jupiter. “What did you do?” he murmured as he tried to force his legs to move toward Iason and found they were frozen on the spot. He looked up, saw the creature staring at him now. “What did you do!”

I granted him a final wish. To make him Human.

The familiar voice sounded around them, even as Raoul and Katze rushed forward toward Iason. “You made him Human? Why?”

He was corrupted. His perfection marred. He chose to be destroyed rather than join with me.

“He...he’s dead?”

Iason Mink was flawed. The error has been corrected. Iason Mink is no more.

Riki felt his entire body go numb as he looked to where Raoul had turned over his brother, then shook his head mournfully at the lifeless face he found. Riki's cry was loud and long, and seemed to reverberate throughout the chamber.

At the entrance to the building the hair rose on the back of Carrie's neck and she rushed inside. In the streets of Tanagura, market stalls were toppling, the ground began to shake and glass to shatter in several buildings. Humans and Elites cried out in terror and ran for cover

Below the city, in the chamber that contained Jupiter, a surge of blue and green energy suddenly swirled around Riki, like snakes around an ancient idol, then merged into a solid violet burst that surrounded him.

Yiela accepted a hand up off the floor from Katze and gasped at her Prince.
“He...he is a King mage!”

“A what?” Katze demanded and stared at Riki in shock.

The creature in the water screamed as a violet stream of light, shaped like a spear shot out from the circle surrounding Riki. It dove beneath the waves and the sound of laughter sounded around them.

You cannot kill me. I am legion. I am forever. I am Jupiter.

“You are dead!” Riki screamed as his eyes turned white and an eruption of light brighter than a thousand suns burst forth from him, shot across the room and covered the entire length of the water.

Yiela screamed and was blinded instantly, while Katze had managed to pull his jacket over his head and covered his eyes in time.

The water in the pool churned and twisted and then slowly started to boil. The creature that was Jupiter screamed and thrashed and tried to crawl out of the pool but it could not get past the energy that surrounded it.

“The pain! The pain!” Yielia screamed and also started to thrash, even as Katze tried to calm her. “Maku! Maku you must stop! You must stop!”

The Prince did not hear his Eadbarde, or he chose to ignore her. Instead, he lifted his hands into the air and beyond him the creature in the pool was also lifted.

Riki! You are with us! We love you! You are with us! You must help us. You must... Jupiter’s voice was abruptly silenced as a gash appeared across the creature’s forehead, then another across its neck as the entire throat was ripped away from its body. Then an arm, a leg, a second arm...the violet-white energy ripped the creature apart, piece by piece.

“Stop!” Yielia had managed to crawl forward, still in agony from the physic feelings surrounding her, her vision blurred, eyes throbbing, she reached through the burning energy that surrounded Riki. She grabbed his leg and clung to him. “Riki! This is not love! You must stop! Iason would not wish this. You are not a monster! You are Riki!” She had to reach him, had to make him stop because a King Mage who abused his power became the opposite of what that power was. Riki’s power of love would turn to the power of hate and he would never recover from that darkness.

Suddenly, what was left of the creature dropped back into the pool, its blood turning the water a deep crimson, as the energy surrounding it abruptly dissipated. Jupiter was dead. Riki dropped to his knees, stared at the floating carcass in the pool, then down at his hands. He heard whimpering beside him and looked at Yielia who was openly crying and cradling her burned hands. No thoughts came to him, no words, only actions and thus he took her hands in his and held them, almost instantly her burns healed. He then passed his hands over her eyes and she could once more.

“Maku,” she sobbed, but he was already moving away from her, crawling to the body of his lover that was still lying dead on the floor next to a likeness of himself.

Riki caressed Iason’s cold, still face, so beautiful even in death. “I love you,” he said finally and honestly. He had said the words before but had never been truly sure of them, had never fully believed them. “I’m in love

with you, Iason. I want to be with you and only you.” He laid his head against Iason’s bloody chest. “I love you. I can say it now, understand it now, and mean it. I love you. I love you.”

Katze’s eyes filled as he watched the mongrel who had become a Prince, the pet who had become a mate to a Blondie and the street rat who was now the Destroyer of Jupiter weep over the body of a Blondie. He felt he had never seen anything so courageous, or so tragic.

Yiela followed her Prince’s path to the body of his beloved and moved to the other side of Iason. “Jupiter didn’t kill him, Maku,” she said, gently laying her hand on Riki’s arm. “He chose death to avoid joining with it. It intended to use Iason as a vessel and...” She glanced at the body of the clone a couple of feet away. She had known it was not the real Riki, had tried to tell Iason but the Blondie had been so horrified, so angry that he had only reacted. If she’d had any doubts before about how Iason had felt about her Prince, she had none now. “I am sorry. I tried to stop him. I am so, so sorry, Maku.”

“It was Jupiter that started it, Jupiter that changed him. Everything is that things fault and...” Riki’s voice broke as he pulled Iason’s bloody hand and pressed it to his face. “If...if I had listened to you. If I had worked harder or...of if I’d never met Iason he...he...” Tears slid down Riki’s face, mixing with the blood that was now smeared there.

Yiela searched for words of comfort and could find none. It was here, in this moment that she realized the extent of Riki’s feelings for the android, and then she looked at Raoul, such a beautiful face now hard and grim as he rocked Katze who was openly wept. It seemed there was far more to Iason Mink than she had initially believed. He was not just a powerful being, he was important to others as well, perhaps even necessary in some aspects.

“I see.” She closed her eyes and concentrated until her hands started to glow green, then she put them over Iason’s chest. “Yes, I see now.”

Riki lifted his head, wiped at his tears. “Can...can you heal him?”

“I do not know. As a machine it would be beyond my powers, it may still be beyond them. There is so much damage.”

Riki sat up suddenly and put his hands over hers. “Can I help? Can you use me to help save him? Use what I have?”

Yiela opened her eyes and met his. “There is so much damage, Maku.” She looked down at Iason again. His internal injuries could not be repaired, but she could not turn away from that sliver of desperate hope in her Prince’s eyes. “There is another way.”

“What? What is it?”

“It is an ancient spell, difficult and unreliable.”

“Just tell me!”

“I could not even attempt it on my own, but you are a King Mage, so you have the power...”

“I don’t know what that means!” Riki snapped, reached across Iason and grabbed her shoulders. “Just tell me what I have to do to save him.”

“It is called a Fusticel. It is a spell that deals with time, Maku, which is a taboo subject for any magic on Avalon. It means death for anyone who uses them.”

“We’re not on Avalon. Just tell me what we have to do, please! I can’t lose him, Yiela. I’ll give you anything you want, everything I have, just please!”

“Very well” Yiela opened the locket that hung around her neck.

While the spell itself was forbidden on Avalon, the exception was in the case of an Eadbarde to save her charge. At birth a lock of hair is taken from the royal child and placed in a locket like the one she carried. A lock of the Eadbarde’s own hair is placed with it, so that the strands would be intertwined over time. An Eadbarde always hoped never to have to use the spell, but she knew that this was the only way she knew to help him now.

“I will need a lock of Iason’s hair,” she told Riki.

Katze, sensing hope for Iason, pulled away from Raoul and pulled out a pocket blade but Raoul snatched it from him and tossed it on the floor.

“That will not do. A Blondie’s hair is too strong.” He knelt beside Iason. “Forgive me brother.” He grabbed the ends of Iason’s hair between his hands and used his teeth to rip through it. He handed her the strands. “What is your intention? How does the spell work?”

“If it works,” she began as she slid the golden hair into her locket and placed it directly against her skin again. “It will turn back time and heal his injuries.”

“What about Jupiter?” Katze demanded looking at the darkened tank. “Will it bring Her back?”

“No, the spell will only affect the recipient and the casters.”

“How far back will time go?” Riki asked. “Will we forget everything? Will Iason still...” He thought of how far they had come in the last few years to be together and was worried about losing all of that. “Will he feel the same?”

“Some retain their memories, most do not. As his genetic makeup is partially artificial, I cannot say what will happen.” She put her hand on Riki’s arm again. “This may not work, Riki.”

“But it could and right now it’s the only chance we have.”

“It will affect you as well, you must understand this. This kind of power will extract a heavy price.”

“I don’t care,” Riki insisted but Raoul also spoke.

“What kind of price?” If by some miracle Iason did recover, he would be devastated if the price was Riki’s own life. Raoul knew his brother well enough to understand that.

Yiela looked at him. “For each fraction of time adjusted, one year of life force is taken.”

“How many fractions will be required?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Riki interrupted and Yiela offered him a sad smile.

“It will be between one and ten years, Maku.”

“Fine. Let’s do it.”

“Riki! You are not gonna give up ten years of your life!”

Everyone glanced over at Carrie and Ran’talgis as they rushed into the chamber, having caught the tail end of the conversation.

“I have no life if Iason stays dead!” he shouted at her, so close to the edge and utter despair that he could barely contain his emotions. “Stay over there and keep out of this, Carrie. I mean it.”

“Riki...”

Riki ignored her and turned to Yiela. “Do it.”

She nodded, but turned to Katze who now knelt beside her. “Please, allow me to do this for you?” She was putting her hand on his leg even before she finished speaking.

Katze felt the surge of power spear through his limb, hot and painful at first, but then cool, tingling and soothing. The ache from his ankle was gone away so quickly and cleanly he had trouble remembering what it had even felt like.

Yiela smiled at him. “It may still trouble you on occasion, but that should help somewhat.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly as Raoul pulled off the stabilizer boot to view his healed ankle. “Thank you, Yiela.”

“Now.” She pulled the locket from around her neck, held it against her palm and placed that palm to Iason’s bloody chest. She then grasped Riki’s and placed it beside hers on the body. “Do not break contact,” she warned him as she clasped his other hand and placed their joined hands just up from Iason’s waist. She looked at the others. “Do not interfere until it is done. Any distraction or interruption will destroy the spell immediately.”

Everyone nodded and watched as she took a deep breath, then closed her eyes. Riki followed her lead and shut his own, he could instantly feel the pull of power from her.

Raoul helped Katze to his feet and stepped further away as the trio were awash in blue-green light. He watched astounded as the injury to Iason’s chest began to heal and what was considered a Blondie’s blood streamed backwards into the wound until the only a crisp white tunic remained. It appeared to be working and he felt hope rise within him, but then he studied the spell casters, and was both fascinated and appalled at what he saw.

Riki’s dark hair was growing at an exponential rate, down to his shoulders then over them, all the way down to his ass. A beard and mustache also spouted on the mongrel’s face. He was aging. Yielia however seemed to be getting the worst of it, for her raven locks, already long, had grown to a cloak of silver, then white. Hard wrinkles etched into her dark skin, which paled and shriveled the longer the spell went on.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the glow around them dimmed, then faded away. Riki opened his eyes just in time to catch Yielia, who had aged dramatically and was now hardly recognizable.

“W...what happened?” he demanded as he cradled her suddenly frail and trembling body.

“The spell... has a price, Maku.” She reached up to touch his long hair. “It suits you.”

Riki grabbed at his hair, stunned, then ran a hand over his face. “What happened to me?”

“You have aged ten years, Maku.”

“And you? This is more than ten years!”

“I do not have the... Humanrian gene, nor am I a King Mage. My...age and power were no match for the spell.”

“What has it done to you? How many years did you age?” Her eyes started to close and he gently shook her. “Yielal!”

“Fifty, perhaps more. It is fine, Maku.”

“No! I didn’t want this. I didn’t mean for this to happen!”

“You will be happy, that...is all that matters. These days I have spent with you, have made me... so very happy. To see....my beloved Prince...again. Tell them...Tell the Queen, I fulfilled my...promise.”

Riki shook his head in disbelief as Yielal’s eyes closed and her body grew still.

“Riki?”

Riki shifted wet eyes to meet a piercing blue gaze and a sob welled up in his throat as Iason reached for him.

“Come with us,” Iason encouraged as he embraced his last remaining brother.

Raoul had turned the demise of Jupiter into a bid for office and had been elected as the new leader of the Elites. While not all of Jupiter’s children accepted him yet, and many considered him a traitor, Elites were at their core logical. They knew that a leader would be required to get Tanagura and the other cities back on their feet, and as Raoul was now the last Blondie, he was the logical choice.

No one knew that Iason and Riki had survived the war with Jupiter, and they preferred to keep it that way. Iason had managed to retain his memories, and after Jupiter's betrayal and his brush with death, the leader of the syndicate found he no longer had the desire to rule, and so he would fade from existence on Amoi and start a new life with Riki on Avalon. His beloved had suffered tragic losses and no longer wanted to be here, so Avalon was the best avenue for them.

"I won't even pretend that I wish I could," Raoul countered, readily and pulled back to look at Iason. "My place is here. This my home."

"There is nothing left here. With Jupiter gone..."

"There are pieces to collect, cities to resurrect, rules to recover. I do like a challenge."

"It won't be the same," Riki said quietly as he ran a hand over his cleanly shaven face. He hadn't cut his hair, yet, because Yielia had said it suited him, and so he'd pulled it back into a long tail instead that hung well down his back. He thought of the mongrels who had survived the riots at Midas. "Mongrels aren't gonna just meekly accept your authority anymore."

"Won't they?" Raoul smiled. "We shall see, at any rate, ruling them is not on my agenda at the moment."

"It will be a very different world." Iason agreed. "Will you be able to adjust?"

Raoul glanced at Katze. "What do you think? Am I fooling myself by remaining here?"

"Absolutely. You're a complete idiot."

"See!" Riki said as his lips twitched in a grin.

He, for one was glad to be going. He wanted to be away from this wretched place, away from the memories and the stink of death. As long as they remained here there would always be someone trying to hurt them or

destroy them. Amoï wouldn't be the same without Cal, whom they had buried the day before, and Yielas death had made him realize that Avalon was where he wanted to be. Not because he felt any more of a Prince than he had before, but because he owed her to try and make a good life for himself.

"Who will take care of you?" Iason asked. "How can I leave you behind knowing you will be alone?"

"He won't be alone." Katze stepped to Raoul's side. "I'm staying."

"What?"

"I'm staying, Iason. You don't need me anymore, but Raoul does." Katze glanced at Raoul whose expression immediately softened in an almost sappy smile, then he turned back to Iason. "Please, release me from your service."

"I will not release you." Iason stepped forward and dropped his hands onto Katze's shoulders. "You will *always* belong to me, to Iason Mink." He pulled Katze into his embrace. "And so, I will trust you to take care of yourself and my brother."

"I promise." Katze murmured, touched beyond words.

"So, this is it then?" Riki said as Katze and Iason parted and he stuck out his hand. "This is really goodbye?"

Katze nodded and shook Riki's hand. "It appears so."

"In that case." Riki suddenly moved forward, grabbed Katze by the neck and pulled him down for a deep, thorough kiss.

"Riki!" Iason exclaimed, shocked and amused simultaneously even as he and Raoul yanked them apart.

"I couldn't resist, I might not ever see him again!" Riki laughed as Iason swatted him on the ass then captured his mouth in a quick hard kiss. Riki grinned into Iason's eyes. "That's an indirect kiss. You just kissed Katze."

Iason's eyes narrowed and flickered to the black-market dealer whose cheeks were suddenly more rosy than usual. "Did I?" he replied mildly and threw Riki over his shoulder, swatting him on the ass a second time as he turned and headed for their ship. "I think someone is overdue for punishment."

"It was worth it!" Riki waved at Katze behind Iason's back and blew him a big kiss. "See ya red! You got a great mouth, it was totally worth it! Send me smokes okay!"

Katze chuckled as he watched his master board with the squirming mongrel and the exit platform pull up inside the ship. He waved back and was startled when Raoul caught his hand.

"Let me get that mongrel's foul taste out of your mouth," the Blondie said and used his tongue and teeth to erase the memory of Riki's lips.

Katze took a deep breath when he was finally released, stared up into Raoul's green eyes and solemnly said. "You just kissed Riki."

Raoul's eyes widened and he swung out to deliver a similar punishment that Iason had given Riki, but Katze was faster and darted away and slid over the hood of their vehicle to the other side.

"Be nice or you won't get another."

"As if you can say no." Raoul opened the driver side door as the ship fired up and began its ascent.

"I'm gonna miss them."

Raoul nodded. "We will see them again," he decided and slid behind the wheel as Katze joined him on the passenger side. "I will make sure of it."

Notes for the Chapter:

NOTE:

Well, that's it my pretties, I hope you enjoyed reading it and it was worth the wait. There will be an epilogue, as so many have requested it, but this chapter is the last in the story. Much love for your continued patience and support.- Ani.

Chapter 52

Summary for the Chapter:

The future continues for our characters.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the wait, but I wanted to tie things up as best as I could. I hope it was enough. Please review and comment and thank you for all your support!

“Honey, I’m home!”

Katze stepped out of the kitchen with a smile on his face, then scowled and hurried forward as Peter led his bleeding Master to the nearby sofa and hurried off to get the medical kit.

“What happened?”

“A small riot in Ceres,” Raoul returned as Katze helped him off with his red stained jacket and lifted the tunic to see the wound beneath. “The Mongrels are getting more ambitious with their protests.”

“I told you not to go there!”

“I have to maintain some semblance of order, Katze. I have no problem giving them more responsibility and freedom but they are getting ridiculous in their demands.”

Peter returned, briskly removed Raoul’s tunic and began tending to the wound on the Blondie’s side. “Whatever possessed you to do such a thing?”

he scolded as he cleaned the blood from the wound then retrieved a healing wand.

Raoul smirked. “Would you prefer I allowed you to be shot?”

“I can take care of myself, as you well know, and you are only making things more difficult for me this way. Honestly, sacrificing yourself for Furniture...Who ever heard of such a thing?” Despite his ire, Peter was gentle and thorough with his ministrations to Raoul’s wound. “If you died again the pets and I would face another distribution, and after all the trouble I went to before with...”

Raoul smiled over Peter’s head at Katze as the young man continued to mutter his grievances. It had taken the Furniture years of total obedience and dedication to Raoul before he felt comfortable enough voicing his opinion, but after the second time that Raoul had arranged for Peter to remain with him, he felt secure enough in his position to do so. Of course, Peter would never speak to him this way in public, which made it all the more enjoyable for Raoul to deliberately annoy his Furniture in private.

“Indeed, what would I do without you?” Raoul suddenly dropped a kiss on Peter’s bent head, watched the Furniture stiffen in surprise for a second or two, before continuing to bandage the wound.

Peter didn’t want to think about the possibility. He hated to see anything mar the perfection of his masters body, but he knew an hour or so in the healing chamber would prevent any scaring.

“It’s not a fate I would suggest,” Peter decided finally as he straightened, clicked the medkit closed and handed Raoul a clean tunic. He picked up he spoiled tunic, wondered if it was worth repairing. “You’d work yourself to death in those labs of yours, forget to eat, or sleep...”

“I am not really required to do either,” Raoul reminded as he pulled on the fresh shirt.

“Yeah you are,” Katze defended, crossing his arms over his chest. “You get grumpy when you don’t eat and even your brilliant mind needs to rest

occasionally or you'll stop being brilliant."

"Perhaps I could exist merely on sex?" Raoul tossed at Katze then saw the scowl that Peter shot him and smothered a laugh. "Perhaps not?"

"If you insist on going to these rally's, do be more careful."

"Yes Peter."

"And avoid getting shot again for pity's sake."

"Of course, Peter.

"Sir..." Peter flushed, averted his eyes for a moment then looked up again. "I am not deliberately trying to be impertinent, but...well, we depend on you, the pets and I." Peter glanced back at the red-head behind him. "And Katze, of course. You are our master and we are...well...we..."

Are my family, Raoul finished silently. He put his hand on Peter's shoulder. "I promise to be less reckless and consider such things in future."

Peter nodded curtly. "Good. Yes. Just so." Peter paused a moment, then picked turned away. "I'll just go put these away."

"So, why did you get shot?" Katze asked as Raoul rose and walked back with him to the kitchen of their large home.

Katze had developed a dislike for apartments or condos after what happened to Iason and Riki and then to Cal, so Raoul had purchased twenty acres of property between Midas and Tanagura and had a magnificent home built there. Now the two of them lived there, as well as Shira, AnJell and Peter. While Peter was still the Furniture of the home, Katze liked to do the cooking when he wasn't working.

The Syndicate was a shadow of its former self, but Raoul was now the head of it as well as the main overseer for all of Amoi. Which meant he had to deal with the aftermath of Jupiter's death, the disappearance of the other Blondies and the new uprising of the mongrels.

Katze had taken over Gideon's role as overseer of Midas. But still maintained his dealings in the black market. After all, a leopard couldn't change his spots.

"So, aside from being shot and getting scolded," Katze began as he walked to the oven and checked the timer on his casserole. "How *was* your day?"

"Tedious and annoying." Raoul pulled Katze against him for a slow, deep kiss. "I'm all out of Katze energy and need to replenish."

Katze remained limp and unresponsive until Raoul finally pulled back.

"What is the matter?"

"We're pregnant."

"What?!"

Katze chuckled, it had been well worth the wait to see the surprise on the Blondie's face. "Or rather Shira is and she's very upset about it."

"Whatever for?"

Shira and AnJell had developed a deep love for one another and with permission from Raoul, they had been given permission to breed.

Katze wound his arms around his lover's neck. Raoul had given him everything he didn't know he had wanted, love, attention, a home, a stable job. There was one thing left. "Because she knows they will be sold."

"Well yes, of course, she can't expect to..." His eyes narrowed on Katze's. "She is a pet and offspring of pets are sold, Katze"

"I know."

"Then why would she ever think otherwise?"

Katze leaned in, kissed Raoul as the Blondie had wanted earlier. "Maybe, because I told her otherwise."

“Katze! Why would you do that?”

Katze let his arms drop and he stepped back. He knew Raoul would be a hard sell, the Blondie had already made so many compromises. Maybe this was one he simply couldn’t do. “Things are different now, we’re different. I thought it would be nice to raise the kids here, as...as a family.”

“A family?” Raoul repeated. He already had a family, wasn’t what they had enough? “Is that what you want?”

Katze shrugged and turned his back to Raoul as the timer went off and he grabbed a protective mitt so he could pull the dish from the oven and set it on the counter. “I don’t know what I want Raoul. I’ve never known what I wanted until...” He turned back, his gaze sharp, penetrating. “Until you. I never wanted a lover, now I have one. I never wanted a home and this...” He spread his hands wide to encompass the beautiful house that Raoul had built for them. “This is home.”

He pulled off the mitts, put his hand on the Blondie’s chest. He wouldn’t seduce, cajole or threaten, as had been his reputation in the past. None of that was needed for Raoul and it had taken him a very long time to come to terms with the fact that the one way, the only possible way to get what he wanted from Raoul, was simply to ask; the Blondie denied him nothing.

“I never thought about having kids, or a real family, but when Shira told me she was pregnant I...Raoul, all I could think of was what that kid, that innocent little baby would go through on the open market. I thought, maybe, we could keep it, you know?”

“If you felt this way, why did you never speak of it before?”

“Because I didn’t feel this way before. But now...now I want...”

Raoul stared down into Katze’s beautiful golden eyes, witnessed the hesitation and the sincerity in them and was swamped with love. He caressed Katze’s cheek. “You want to be a father?”

Katze nodded, slowly. “I know I’m probably the worse case scenario, I mean, what do I know about raising kids, especially after the father I had, but...” He leaned his head against Raoul’s chest, felt the Blondie’s arms come around him and sighed. “I miss Cal, Raoul. I miss him so damn much. If he had gotten the chance to be a kid, to be a real kid, maybe he’d be alive today. He was so *good*, you know? So...so pure and yet so many bad things happened to him.”

“We could have kept...”

Katze shook his head. “No. No that was for Riki and Iason, not for us. I want something different for us.”

“You were a good child, Katze. Horrible things happen to you, yet you turned out well. You thrived in fact.”

“No. I survived, it’s not the same.”

Katze knew that he was not the person he could have been, had all that shit not happened to him. He could read other people’s emotions like a book, but his own were far more difficult. Letting himself feel anything, letting himself react emotionally was a trial that he continued to bear, and only because he knew it was what Raoul expected and wanted. Raoul knew that Katze did not, could not experience the depth of feelings that the Blondie did, and accepted what little Katze could offer.

“This is life on our planet, Katze. Some things may change but others cannot.” Raoul understood his lover’s thoughts as if he had spoken them aloud. Katze may think he was incapable of real feelings because he was still unwilling to completely relinquish control of them to someone else, but Raoul knew Katze was slowly adapting, slowly changing. “It never seemed to bother you before.

“No, no I didn’t, but Raoul, I want...”

“What do you want my darling?”

“I want to bring a child into this rotten world of ours and let him or her feel the love and devotion I can’t. I want them to feel safe in a way I never did. I want them to be happy and inspired and enjoy everything about being a child the way I...”

“The way you couldn’t? The way Cal didn’t?”

Katze nodded. “Being Furniture wasn’t bad, it was probably the best thing that ever happened to most kids, it was for me, but we were never free to be kids, Raoul. Cal...even after his attack he tried so damn hard to adjust and go on as normal and it was killing him. I could see how it was just ripping him apart from the inside because despite our training, despite being Furniture he was still just a kid inside and he couldn’t deal with that horror.”

“Katze, you can’t save every child on Amoř...”

“I know, but I can save this one!” Katze grabbed Raoul by the lapels. “Please, I’m asking you, let’s keep the Shira’s baby and raise it as our own; not as Furniture or a pet but as a child.”

“Shira is not mature enough to care for a child, Katze.”

“I know, but she’s more mature than she was and she’s getting better every day, now that she has AnJell. She’ll still be its mother and can see it and help raise it. It would be the first kid for generations to have a female influence and that’s good...but it would be ours. Yours and mine, together.”

“It means so much to you?”

“I *want* to be a father, Raoul. I want to be the kind of father that doesn’t hurt their kid, I want to know that it’s possible. Please?”

Raoul pulled Katze closer. “You continue to surprise me, Katze. Of course we may keep it, you know I would give you anything an everything you ask for.”

Katze did know that, which was why he was careful not to ask for too much or too often. “Thank you.”

“Hmmmm.” Raoul glanced up and saw Shira and AnJell hovering by the entrance way. “Would you be willing to give up your child to us, Shira?” he asked quietly.

The two pets joined hands and walked towards their master.

“If it means keeping it and staying beside it, then yes, Master. I will happy defer it to you and Katze for raising, only...” She ran a hand over her still flat stomach. “May I play with it on occasion?”

Katze laughed suddenly, pulled away and caught her hand between both of his. “Shira, you’re the child’s mother. You can do much more than just play with it. We can read books on child rearing and both learn how to do well by it.”

Shira smiled shyly and glanced at Raoul. “Is that possible, master?”

“I believe so, and AnJell may take part as well, as he is the father, however all decisions will go through Katze and I, understood?”

She nodded, enthusiastically then threw her arms around Katze, kissed his cheek and then threw her arms around her master. “Oh thank you! Thank you thank you thank you, master!”

Raoul patted her back, and thought of the child and the changing times. “Shira, perhaps you should stop calling me master.”

She reared back in shock. “Why? What did I do? I’m sorry! Please don’t sell me!”

“For Jupiter’s sake, pet, I am not going to sell you. I simply meant that we should find another word for you to use so that the child, when it comes, does not get confused.”

“How about grandpa?” Katze smirked and barely dodged Raoul’s hand. He chuckled and backed up a step. “Gramps? Old man?”

Riki sat on the bench in the Queen's Wood, the garden that had once held his essence, or spirit of his last days as a child. Everyone had thought him dead, but he was not, and it seemed strange to him that some form of his presence had remained here. The Queen had explained that it was partially due to the trauma he had suffered, having watched his father be killed and eaten by an alien race, and then himself kidnapped and carted off to worlds unknown.

Whatever it was, his essence, trauma or spirit, the area was no longer a dark place filled with phantom voices of the past and dreadful, oppressive feelings. Whether that was to the fact that they had removed his memorial statue, and replaced it with one for the King, who's spirit had been lost years ago due to the Vilipshine who had replaced him, or the fact that Riki had come to terms with the memories of that child, they no longer haunted the wooded garden.

Next to his father's statue were two pedestals with a clear rounded orb atop them. The Queen had called it a Syngon, a memorial orb, and it showed the faces of the those that had passed on. There was one for Yielia and one for Cal.

Cal was buried back on Amoï, but when Riki and Iason had come here after the destruction of Jupiter, the Queen had seen his distress and grief. She showed him how to use his own memories to create the memorial orb for Cal, so that it would show his lovely face, and if anyone was close to it and watching, the scenes in the Syngon faded and twirled, melted and mixed into a past scene from Riki's memory.

It had helped to share those memories with the Queen, but had been deeply intimate procedure and had taken Riki months to work up the courage to complete the orb. Once he had there had been a modicum of relief. He couldn't go back to Amoï, and even if he could he didn't put much stock in

visiting sites of the dead. Once you were dead, that was it. But the tradition here on Avalon had allowed him to share and accept his grief and his guilt for Cal's death, and for Yielas.

Yielas Syngon did not hold many of his memories, because he had been so harsh with her, so suspicious for most of the time he had known her, so the Queen and others who knew her well created the memorial orb and Riki contributed the one memory from his childhood of them building sandcastles. It was still the only clear memory he had of that time, nothing else had come back.

Initially Riki was coming here every day, but eventually his sorrow and guilt eased so that he only came by when he was really missing them, or when he was having a really good day and just wanted to share it with them.

“Riki?”

He turned as the Queen walked towards him, stunning in a lavender gown and long silver robe. It had been five years and he still couldn't quite believe she was his mother, or that he was a Prince. He had accepted the role as best he could, there was little point fighting it now that he had to stay on Avalon, but he'd had stipulations of his own to contend with her desire for him to rule. Eventually they reached a consensus, and things between them were cordial, sometimes even affectionate, if not quite as that of mother and son.

“There is a call for you.”

He nodded, rose and pushed back the black hair that he had decided to keep long. Gone were the mongrel and pet clothes of the past, but Riki still had to be Riki, so instead of the strange tight trousers the other nobles wore that bulged at the knee and rounded at the ankles, Riki wore long, pleated black slacks and a silk amethyst blouse that was open at the neck and swept almost lovingly over his arms and across his torso. Around that a tailored jacket, not so different from his favorite leather one, but this one was made of soft fabric in black and gold and stopped at his waist, where so many on Avalon wore them much longer, like a cloak. On his feet were knee high

black leather boots, the one thing he insisted be in leather, despite the royal clothes designer's dismay. Leather was for ruffians or battle armor, not for nobility, but Riki proved he was both when they tried to overrule his choice. He still refused to wear underwear.

"Is it important?" he asked quietly.

He'd had a hard day of studying, then checking that the faming districts were on schedule with their crops to be shipped off world. He had 'people' to do that for him, but some of it was Riki's pet project and having never been given that kind of responsibility before, he wanted to be sure that it was working properly. Then he'd had to participate in an audience with the Queen for local requests.

Riki didn't understand why the people of Avalon needed permission for every little thing, Avalon was a much freer world than Amoï, but the Queen explained it wasn't necessarily about permission as it was seeking approval for their projects from the crown. The core philosophy on Avalon was community and courtesy, a rule that Riki still had trouble digesting, even after five years.

He also couldn't get his head around the whole judgement of disputes power he and the Queen had. If someone was fighting with someone else, Riki's philosophy was to let them duke it out and the last man standing wins. That was not the way things were done on Avalon, however, so he had to sit around listening to people whine about how one neighbor's crop had grown into another neighbor's garden, or how one peddler tried to charge double for what the price of an item was worth. It was all nonsense and a waste of time to Riki, but that was part of the drudgery of being Royalty, apparently. You had to sit around and listened to weak-willed whiners who couldn't find their way out basement if you gave them the map to the stairs and a key to the door.

"It is your friend, Carrie," Celestia said as she moved behind Riki and began braiding his hair which had gotten into disarray on his ride to the farming districts earlier. She was delighted he had taken to horseback riding, but he really needed to learn how to keep up appearances.

“Okay.” Riki glanced back at the memorials, allowed himself the simple pleasure of her grooming him. Despite all that had happened he had managed to hold on to the feeling of love that he’d discovered at the beach house on Amoï, and while he was still slightly uncomfortable with showing that love, he found he was okay receiving it. “Celestia?”

The Queen had accepted that Riki just could not call her mama or mother again. “Yes, Riki?”

“Do I have to go to that ball thing tomorrow?”

“You are expected to attend as a Prince of Avalon.” Celestia pulled a piece of ribbon from an invisible pocket of her gown and secured the braid that now fell halfway down Riki’s back. “However, you may be forgiven the appearance if you have to deal with an important matter of state.”

He turned, looked at her. “Like testing the new defense systems to make sure they are working properly?”

“That is something that could be done at any time, Riki...” She sighed as he started to frown and his dark eyes started to shimmer suspiciously. “Oh alright, you can have the night off. I cannot say no when you look at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked innocently.

“You know exactly what you are doing, do not try to deny it.” When he slowly smiled she laughed. “However, if you do not attend the ball then you will have to come with me next week to Coruwst for the trade talks.”

Riki rolled his eyes. “Oh come on!”

“Is it a deal or is it not a deal?” After five years the Queen had learned exactly how to negotiate with her prideful, rebellious son.

Riki sighed, but in truth he’d much rather make the trip then get dolled up and be stared at by everyone who were just waiting for him to fuck up. “Fine, I’ll go to the stupid trade meeting on stupid Liverwurst.”

Celestia swallowed another chuckle and gave him a stern look. “Coruwst, Riki. It would be less offensive if you can at least pronounce the name of their planet correctly.”

“If you don’t want them to be offended, don’t take me.”

This time it was the Queen who rolled her eyes, something else she had learned from him. “Go take your call before I change my mind and insist that you dance with every lady at the ball.”

“Fat chance!” Riki smirked, Iason wouldn’t stand for that, but he started down the path through the garden and towards the castle.

Once inside what had been dedicated as the Prince’s study, Riki settled at the circular communication device that swirled with green and silver colours, and waved his hand in front of it. Almost immediately Carrie’s feline face appeared.

“Hey Fur Face!”

“Hey Tight Ass!” she tossed back with a grin, exposing her razor sharp canines. “Blow anything up this week?”

“It was one time!” he growled but was laughing inside.

After he and Iason had been on Avalon for almost a year, he’d reestablished contact with Carrie as she had decided to go back with Ran’talgis to the new home planet of the Dakfure. He’d told her that he’d been trying to mix together a potion that his alchemy teacher instructed him to make, and used the wrong ingredient. He’d blown up the entire lab area, though luckily he’d managed to shield everyone inside the lab from the blast before they could get hurt. He had almost complete control over his powers now. Since he’d destroyed Jupiter, they had just clicked into place as if they had always been there, but he learned that using them too often became a drain on his system so he was careful not to use them for frivolous things.

“One time is all it takes,” Carrie laughed. “Anyway, I didn’t call just to ask if you tried to kill anyone again, I have a favor.”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what it is!”

“Knowing you I won’t like it, so no.”

“Listen, High Prince Consort...”

“Shut up!” Riki still hated that title, even though it was no longer valid now that Jupiter was gone.

“You will listen to my request and thoughtfully consider it or...”

“Or?” he challenged back.

“Or, I will send a message to Iason and tell him how much you loved wearing that dress and inspire him to put them on you more often.”

Riki opened his mouth then snapped it closed and glared at her. He had no doubt she would do it. “Fine. What do you want?”

“Are you free next month?”

“I’m free every month, or don’t you remember me telling you about my status change?”

“Oh, what a brat you are. I’m glad we live on separate planets!”

“Same goes! I don’t have to pretend to like that junk you used to sell!”

“My shit was gold, and you are one giant pain in the ass.”

“Oooh, someone hasn’t had her litter changed today.”

“I have an entire planet to piss in,” she tossed. “At least I don’t have to dress up like a little dolly for all the pretty peoples.”

“At least I don’t have fur on my dick!”

“My tail could beat your tiny dick hands down!”

“Bitch!”

“Ass!”

They grinned at each other.

“I miss you,” Carrie sighed in a much softer voice. “No one talks to me the way you do.”

“Yeah,” Riki leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands, wishing he could physically touch the woman in front of him. “This entire planet is seriously lacking a sense of humor.”

“Yeah,” she agreed and grew misty eyed. “Well, shit.” She wiped at her face before the tears fell.

“God, don’t cry!”

“I’m sorry, I’m hormonal.”

“Is it catching?”

She laughed and her melancholy instantly vanished. “No, you idiot. My hormones are out of whack because I’m pregnant.”

It took a moment for the words to fully register and then his eyes grew very wide. “Holy Shit! You’re gonna have kittens?”

“They’re not...” She laughed and shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Who knocked you up?” Riki demanded, suddenly very serious. “Did someone hurt you? I thought it was just you and the Dakfure there? Do you need me to come get you? Who did it? Why...”

“Riki! Riki stop!” She put her hand towards the screen, overwhelmed by his protectiveness. “I haven’t been assaulted.” She lowered her eyes and ran her

tongue over her teeth. “I...I’ve met someone.”

Riki leaned even closer to the screen. “Who?”

“His name is Sallas, he’s the second son of the Chief.”

Riki grinned. “So, he’s like a prince?”

“More or less.” Her golden fur turned slightly auburn around her face. “He’s claimed me as his mate and our joining ceremony will be next month. I...I would like you and Iason to come, if you can.”

“Do you *want* to be his mate?” Riki asked, once again very serious.

She nodded. “I do. He’s been courting me for a long time, well, almost since I got here really, but I was too...well, you know about my trust issues.”

Riki nodded. “Yeah.” Carrie had been betrayed by almost everyone that had ever known her, except for him and Iason.

“He was very persistent and so was I, but in the opposite way. I insisted that he wouldn’t want to be tied to me, because I am half Human and...” Carrie’s eyes welled up again and she quickly lowered them again. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re homicidal, I get it.”

That made her laugh again. “Hormonal!” she corrected “Although the way I’ve been acting you may not be that far off.”

“So what did he say when you told him about your other half?”

“He already knew. Everyone here knows about my Human half, but he said he didn’t care. He...he said he’d love both sides of me equally. I then reminded him that any cubs we had might be...well...like me and he said he didn’t care. He said it didn’t matter what they were because they would be ours and so he’d still love them just as much.”

“This guy sounds like a total pussy.” Riki said, but he was so happy for Carrie he could burst. She deserved someone to love her for who she was.

“Not at all, he’s the best hunter in the tribe! He’s very strong and smart and so handsome and...”

“Enough!” Riki held up his hand. “I may throw up on you.”

She smiled again and tossed her mane back out of her face. “Will you come? I’m allowed to have someone stand for me, as my tribe, I mean my family, and you and Iason are my family.”

Touched beyond reason, Riki nodded. “Of course we’ll be there.” And he would be, he decided. He wanted to see Carrie mated to someone and finally happy and secure. He wanted to see where she lived now, in a place where she could put down roots and no longer had to run away or hide who she was.

“Thank you.” Carrie nodded pleased. “So, have they made you King yet?”

“No, and they won’t, either.”

“Won’t they? You’re the Queen’s only heir, so there isn’t really anyone else to do it, is there?”

Riki shrugged. “She’s kind of having a mating ceremony too, actually.”

“Oh? Who to?”

“Some guy from some clan.”

Carrie grinned. “So, is this some guy from some clan going to be King then?”

“No.” Riki sighed, he wished it was that easy. “He’ll be an earl or, duke or some shit. He’ll just be her consort and won’t have any actual role or power.”

“Oh, so like you and Iason then?”

“Shut up.”

“Well, are you happy for her then?”

“I don’t care one way or the other.”

“But you’re getting a new dad!”

“Fuck off.”

He sounded so serious that Carrie chuckled. “Aww, don’t be that way. Look at it like this, if they have any kids then maybe one of *them* can be the new King or Queen and you’ll be free of it.”

Riki straightened. “Huh?”

“I mean, if the Queen has another son, then that would make him a Prince too, and so maybe...”

“She can’t do that!” Riki barked and then sat back stunned at himself for it.
“I...I mean...she can’t do that, can she?”

“Have kids? I don’t know, unless there’s a medical condition or her age doesn’t allow...”

“I mean a son! She can’t have another son can she?”

Carrie scowled. “It’s a possibility, a fifty-fifty chance.” She saw Riki’s face flush and then pale almost instantly. “Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing Forget it.”

“Something is, come on. What did I say that upset you?”

“Nothing, really, I mean, it would be good, what you said. If...if she had another kid, a son then...” She wouldn’t need him anymore. Did that mean that the second boy would replace him? He didn’t know how it worked

when there were multiple children, but wouldn't the oldest get pushed out to make way for the next? Would he be sent away again to an orphanage and...He stopped himself. He was too old for an orphanage.

"Riki, you said you didn't want to be King," Carrie offered confused. "This is one way that..."

"I don't care about the King thing, but *I'm* her son! If she has another then I'll have to leave, right? She won't need two sons, right? Isn't that how it works?" Where would he and Iason go if they couldn't stay here? They had a life here now, they had a good life here!

"No."

Riki turned at the voice from behind him and Carrie tried to see past him to who the visitor was. Queen Celesta stood in the doorway.

"Wh..." Riki sputtered and turned his back on her. "Are you spying on me?"

"I was not spying and that is not how it works, Riki." She moved forward and nodded at Carrie. "If you will excuse me, Carrie, I need to speak with my son."

"Sure thing. Sorry, Riki, good luck, love ya, bye!"

Carrie was gone before Riki could reply, but he still refused to look at the Queen, even as she caught his face in her hands and turned him to meet her gaze.

"*You* are my son, my first son. You will always be my first son and therefore the most precious to me."

Riki felt relief at her words and then shame that he needed to hear them. He tried to shrug her off. "I don't care. You can have as many more kids as you want. Have a dozen kids, it has nothing to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you," she insisted. "First because they will be your siblings, and second because I will still, always love you the most

above all.”

Riki felt something spill into his heart, relief, gratitude, love?

“And third regardless of how many children I do or don’t have, only you will be King, Riki.”

“Fuck!”

Celestia laughed and handed him the package one of the staff had given her that was addressed to Riki. “This came for you.”

She took the package as an excuse to seek out her son again, even though they had spoken in the garden only moments before. Riki was not as resistant to spending time with her now, but nor was he particularly generous with it. They did not have the relationship she once desired, but she would fight to keep the relationship they’d managed to develop, and if that meant taking time with her son wherever and however she could, then that’s what she would do. Let them call her needy and desperate, she was a mother who adored her child and even if Riki wasn’t hers biologically, she would love him because of the man he was.

Riki stood up and scowled at it, then saw the name on the back of the box for the sender and grinned. “Finally!” He stood up, kissed her cheek almost absently, then started out. “I’m going home. See you tomorrow!”

Celestia touched her cheek where he kissed her then smiled.

Riki’s horse was prepared and ready for him when he entered the palace stables.

“Ride well, Maku,” the young man smiled up as Riki mounted the magnificent black beast.

“Thanks, Stane. I’ll keep him with me tonight.”

“As you wish, Sire.”

Riki urged the horse into a gallop across the cobblestone path, and through the large gate at the back of the palace that two of the guards hurried to open for him. He sprinted off into the open field of grass.

One of the conditions of Riki staying on Avalon was that he did not wish to live in the palace. Instead, a comfortable two level cottage was built on the north end of the vast acreage of the palace grounds, still secured within the palace's main boarder walls, but far enough from the castle that it awarded them privacy. The top steeples of the palace could still be seen from their cottage, but high hedges, like the one Riki's horse quickly jumped over, and a large orchard of trees kept them hidden from spying eyes.

As he rounded a corner and jumped another hedge, he wove in and out of the trees until he could see the shining white stone of their house. Home, he thought. He'd never really had one before, never felt the need for one, but every day since the cottage had been built, the feeling of contentment he got at seeing it still filled him with joy. He and the horse burst out of the woods and onto the sandstone path that lead up to the cottage, there was of course an actual road from the palace to the cottage but Riki rarely took it. It was more fun his way.

Iason turned and rose from where he had been adding fresh flowers to the side garden that bordered the house, even as Hev, the young boy who looked after Riki's horse when he kept him at home stepped into view. They also had a lady to cook for them, but neither she or Hev lived at the cottage.

"I've got him, Sir," Hev assured even as Riki leapt down and tossed the reins to the kid. Riki gave the horse a loving stroke on the neck, then patted his flank as Hev led the animal off around to the back of the house.

"What the hell are you planting now?" Riki demanded as he stepped up, grabbed Iason by the front of his tunic and hauled him down for a delicious kiss. "More daisies?"

"No, petunias." Iason pulled off his soiled gardening gloves, grabbed Riki by the neck and hauled the smaller man up to his toes for another deep and more thorough greeting. "Celestia gave them to me, she said they are a very hearty flower."

“Does that mean you can’t kill them?”

Iason had floundered for something to do when they first arrived on Avalon, and once the cottage was built, he’d decided the grounds needed some colour so had developed an interest in horticulture. On Amoï he’d merely had to order someone to design and create a lush garden for him, but here he decided to do it on his own. After all, he was a Blondie, and therefore he could do anything better than anyone else.

Unfortunately, Iason, who was great at so many things, had a difficult time keeping the plants he selected from dying. Celestia had laughed and claimed that Iason had a black thumb instead of a green one. The Blondie didn’t understand the reference but suspected it was some sort of mild insult and refused to admit defeat. Daises became his passion, because they were essentially a weed and thus harder to kill, and so for a while their gardens were filled with every colour of daisy that could be found. Over time, the Queen found more sustainable plants for him to nurture so now they had a nice mixture of hearty plants surrounding the cottage.

Luckily, to distract Iason’s annoyance at not being a good gardener, Riki convinced Celestia to make Iason head of their defense program and intelligence network. The Queen’s advisors had not seen the point of such a position, as they were a peaceful planet, but Celestia agreed with her son that after the treachery and near invasion of the Vilipshine, they needed to be protected.

Despite the initial prejudice they faced against Iason being a Blondie, he soon became worth his weight, and probably several other Blondie’s weight, in gold to them. Within the first eight months he had developed a strategic network of intelligence officers that would oversee any visitors to the planet. They would not infringe on people’s rights or offend anyone, Celsestia had been firm on that, but there were ways to monitor and be discrete, which was something Iason knew quite a bit about. He also added contacts he had on other planets that would let him know if there were any more rumblings from the Vilipshine or possible plots to attack or overthrow Avalon, which was a planet rich in resources.

By the second year Iason had purchased, developed and implemented an arsenal of advanced weaponry that could be used on the surface and in space against attacking ships. The Avalonians already had some impressive weapons, but Iason increased their use and power tenfold and added to the equation well enough that most races were better off to leave Avalon in peace.

Before Iason could deliver a stinging slap to his ass for the killing comment, Riki laughed and pushed away. “Are they home yet?”

Iason nodded towards the pathway that Riki had avoided on his ride. “Speak and you will be heard.”

Two children walked down the pathway. A young girl with long dark hair and skin the colour of creamed coffee. Her name was Aliya and she was Yielas niece, whom Riki had learned about when they first came back to Avalon when he’d had to explain about Yielas death. The child had lost both her parents during the battle with the Vilipshine and had been staying with Yielas mother while Yielas Amoi. However, Yielas mother was quite old and after the loss of her daughter she seemed to retreat into herself, until finally passing away in her sleep just last year. Riki decided to take the girl in as a debt he owed to his Eadbarede.

The pale child, younger than the first, had hair the colour of sun-kissed wheat and blue eyes that sparkled with life and laughter. Riki’s heart flipped over in his chest as it often did when he looked at Calen, who was almost the exact image, only younger, of another boy that he had loved.

When Katze had come for a visit two years ago, he brought with him a special gift from Raoul. The Blondie had extracted samples of DNA from Cal before the young Furniture had been buried, after the fall of Jupiter. He had used that DNA and his procedure for creating genetically engineered pets, to clone Cal. It had taken Raoul a few years to adjust the procedure so the child would grow quickly for its first few years, then age normally after the age of six, which was the usual age that Furniture were selected to undergo the castration process and begin training. He also had to filter out the increased sexual desire genes that were inherent in his engineered pets.

The result was not quite an exact replica of Cal, but a very close one, close enough that Calen could be Cal's own child, rather than a clone. When Katze had first delivered the boy, Riki had become severely distraught. He understood that Raoul had been trying to do something kind, in his own Blondie way, but seeing a boy that looked so much like their former Furniture made all that sorrow and grief and guilt return.

Ironically, it had been Iason, whom Riki had assumed would not even consider taking on a child for anything other than as a pet or Furniture, that pointed out to Riki it was a chance to allow Cal to grow up and have a real childhood. It would also make them a family, something that Iason seemed excited about. Riki had still been reluctant, but when Katze had apologized and said he would return the boy to Raoul, Riki found that he couldn't let them leave that way. He didn't want to keep the child, but nor could he let him go. In the end, the boy stayed and they named him Calen.

“Father! Papa!” Calen hurried up waving a sheet of paper. “I scored highest in all the class!”

Riki grinned as the boy jumped into his arms, he lifted him and scowled. “Did you cheat?”

“Teacher says cheating only hurts the person doing the cheating, so why would I want to hurt myself?”

“A wise teacher indeed,” Iason agreed and patted their son on the head. watched Calen beam at him in pleasure. “And you Aliya?”

She was such a pretty thing, Iason often thought. Dark hair and eyes, like Riki, though her skin was a richer shade than Riki's. It was difficult sometimes for him to remember they weren't pets, and he couldn't help think what a price she would fetch on the open market. He would never sell her of course, he adored her far too much, but it was still quite an adjustment to his way of thinking.

Aliya, who had approached at a far more sedate pace, which she felt more appropriate for a girl on the cusp of ten cycles, came to a sudden halt a foot or so away and lowered her eyes. “I did not do as well.”

“You weren’t first?” Iason asked “Were you second?” She shook her head. “Last?” Another head shake.

“Did you take the test?” Riki teased as he felt Calen squirm a little, meaning he wanted to be set down. He set the boy on his feet and watched him crouch to look at the new flowers Iason had planted.

“Did you do your best?” Iason countered, flicking a look at Riki.

Aliya nodded but kept her eyes averted. “Yes.”

“Then your score is just as important as Calen’s.”

She glanced up at the Blondie and felt warmth flood her cheeks. “Really?”

She was grateful to both her new guardians, but she could not deny that she was completely in love with Iason Mink. He was so tall and beautiful and regal. She loved Riki as well, he was funny and affectionate and he was a Prince of Avalon, but attention from Iason gave her butterflies and made her want to do her very best. She absolutely adored him.

“May I see it?” Iason asked and Aliya reluctantly offered him the paper. “An 87. This is a good score Aliya.”

“It is not top. It is not even in second or third.”

“Why must it be?”

“Everyone is expected to get at least one of the three scores, If you don’t...” She broke off and lowered her head again.

“What happens?” Riki nudged her gently. “Do you explode? Do slugs come out of your mouth or your teeth turn into worms?”

Aliya giggled. “No, of course not.”

“So what’s the big deal?” Riki crouched beside her and flicked her chin.

Aliya loved the way Riki smelled and how he teased her, because he was never mean about it. “It means I’m stupid,” she insisted to Riki.

“How dare anyone call you stupid,” Iason decided as he slid his large, cool hand over the top of her head and down through her hair. “Tell me who has spouted such nonsense and I will discipline them immediately.”

“Cool your jets, big guy,” Riki warned, and turned his attention back to Aliya. “Listen, kid, I was shit in school too.”

Calen giggled and turned back to them. “You shouldn’t use profanity in front of children!” he accused somewhat gleefully. “Teacher says.”

“No, *you* shouldn’t use it, because you’re the kid, I’m the adult.” He winked at Aliya. “And your teacher can kiss my ass.”

Both children laughed at that.

“Who’s an adult?” Iason asked pointedly.

Riki glared at his mate. “The point,” he said again to Aliya, “Is that everyone has different skills. You can’t be like everyone else, or be what they expect, and why should you be? You’re a beautiful, smart, insightful girl and anyone who doesn’t accept that can...”

“Kiss your ass!”

Riki grinned and straightened at Calen’s cry even as Iason scowled. “Exactly.”

“Indeed.” Iason swatted Riki’s ass.

“Hey! I didn’t say it, he did!”

“You instigated it, Riki.” Iason decided, even as he moved behind the mongrel to where Calen stood. “While I agree with Riki’s sentiment, such crude remarks should be contained Calen.”

Calen looked up at Iason and warred with his desire to fight or flee, but he saw the kindness in his father's eyes, as well as the censure. He turned around, popped out his butt and accepted the quick smack Iason delivered. It didn't hurt physically, and he took this mild punishment more as a reminder to better himself, rather than something that should shame him.

"Good, now come inside and wash up, we'll have dinner shortly."

"Before we do," Riki began and picked up the package he had set aside when he greeted Iason earlier. "This is for you."

Calen's eyes widened as he stared at the package. "Can I open it now?"

"No you can only stare at it until your eyes fall out. Of course you can open it now."

Calen grinned and pulled off the mailing paper, pried off the top. "Books!" he cried joyously. "It's the entire series of Harry Potter!"

"Those were the ones you wanted right?" Riki asked, offering a silent thank you to Katze for finding the rare old Earth novels, at least in book form. Calen had not believed him when he said there were actually stories of people who did every day magic, just like on Avalon.

"Oh yes! Oh yes!" He jumped forward and hugged Riki's waist. "Can we start them tonight? Can you read them to me tonight? Can we do it right now?"

Riki laughed. "At bedtime we'll start the first book, okay."

"Oh boy! I want to go to bed right now!"

Iason laughed and suddenly swung the boy onto his shoulders. "First we eat, then we bathe and then we read," he decided as he headed towards the cottage.

Riki tossed an arm around Aliya who was smiling up at him. "You want to hear them too, right?"

“I really do,” she admitted, and had been almost as excited as Calen for she had heard so much about the books of magic stories, but she was always trying to act her age. “But don’t tell Calen.”

“You worry too much,” Riki decided as they stepped onto the front walkway and moved towards the door that Iason had left open. “And stop being so mature, you’re a kid, be a kid.”

“Do you remember being a kid, Riki?”

“No, not really. I had to grow up really quickly which is why I am telling you to take your time.”

She slid an arm around his waist as they entered the house. “It’s good to be home,” she sighed as the scents from the kitchen filled her nostrils.

“Yeah.” Riki turned to give one last look out the door, smiled. “Home.”
